

31-23-32 Equals a Big Zero

by Surekha Kadapa-Bose

Many a time young Indians have been influenced by the unreasonable lifestyle, food habits and crazy fads of the West. The latest to hit them is the size zero body. Boosting the cravings of this group of women, aged between 15 and 35 years, are leading Hindi cinema actresses, Kareena Kapoor and Aishwarya Rai, and, of course, fashion designers who prefer to showcase creations on size-zero models.

It all started with Aishwarya Rai - whose net popularity skyrocketed with her marriage into the Bachchan family - dropping oodles of weight for the blockbuster, 'Dhoom II'. However, even as posters of her sculpted body created a buzz in the media, they never really kicked off a weight loss trend. After all, Rai - a former Miss World - was meant to have the unattainable perfect figure.

But with the hitherto healthy Punjabi ' *kudi*' (girl) Kareena Kapoor - whose cinematic '*khaandan*' (family) is known to relish non-vegetarian fare - shedding those extra pounds to gain long beanpole legs, hollow cheeks and a concave-shaped tummy (displayed ever so blatantly in her latest flick '*Tashan*') - size zero has finally arrived.

Kapoor's apparent size zero bod - reportedly a result of a sustained diet of cabbage and apples - has definitely catapulted her to dizzying heights. Suddenly the media, college-going youngsters and even middle-aged moms are discussing Kapoor and her latest weight drop, with dreams of attaining the proportionate nothingness!

So what is size zero? It's a women's clothing size according to the US catalogue sizes system that is the equivalent of an UK size 4 or an Europe size 32-34. It is also a concept within the fashion media relating to models with low body mass.

Thus, being a size zero means having a 31.5" (bust) - 23" (waist) - 32" (hip), or simply being able to fit into a pair of 22-inch waistline jeans.

To look like their favorite star, young women are willing to go to any extent - dangerous crash diets, strenuous exercise routines and starvation - so much so that many end up as classic cases of eating disorders like anorexia nervosa and bulimia.

Anorexia nervosa is characterized by low body weight and body image distortion with an obsessive fear of gaining weight. A recurrent binge eating, followed by compensatory behavior, referred to as "purging", like self-induced vomiting, the use of laxatives, diuretics, and so on, characterizes bulimia.

"These girls and even boys don't realize the irreparable damage this causes to their bodies, especially the bone mass," says a very worried **Dr D. Shrinivas**, a well-known orthopedic surgeon and consultant, attached to Sushrut Hospital in Mumbai. Shrinivas is concerned, as the number of patients coming to him with complaints of bone affiliated ailments has risen considerably, with most belonging to the vulnerable age group of 15 to 35 years.

He explains that after the age of 17 for young women and 18 for men, the body stops growing physically. It then starts accumulating bone mass till around the age of 30-35 years. It is this mass that acts as a protection from osteoporosis and other bone-related ailments later in life.

Reckless lifestyles and thoughtless diet choices hinder this body function. "Bone mass is like a huge bank balance, which if not accumulated properly can cause havoc at a later age," he cautions.

Mumbai-based Neesha Maria Bukht, a registered dietician and an International Sports Sciences Association

(ISSA) fitness expert, agrees. She says that there are dubious dieticians who promise to help youngsters reduce weight within a few days or weeks. "The unknowing clients are not told about the dangerous effects a severe diet will have on the bone mass or density of the body," reveals Bukht, who heads the Talwalkars Training Academy which provides cutting-edge programming and educational information to aspiring fitness professionals.

The hurried measures taken to achieve the coveted weight can lead to other serious problems. Hair loses its sheen and the skin, its elasticity. Stamina is depleted and this leads in turn to mood swings. In severe cases, depression sets in. Irregular menstrual cycles resulting in temporary ovulation problems and, of course, osteoporosis are the more serious consequences.

"Drastic weight loss may not cause permanent damage but temporarily the ovulation will be affected. The reproductive system has the capacity to regain its normal functioning. But it all depends on the age of the woman, the extent to which the body has been damaged and how healthy the other organs are," says Dr Partho Guha Roy, a consulting gynecologist.

Mumbai-based fashion designer Anita Dongre admits, "Designers do create collections that are worn by thin models at fashion shows and shoots, because that adds to the look of the creation." But she is quick to add, "That does not mean that we are encouraging young girls to be the same size."

She acknowledges that the fashion industry wields great influence over youngsters and often shapes the way young women feel about themselves. "Teenage girls aspire to look like their role models. If their role models are healthy it will help inspire girls to be the same. But it is also true that all thin women aren't unhealthy. Designers prefer thin models with glowing skin and lovely hair, which is not possible to get if one tries dangerous methods of losing weight," says Dongre.

Losing weight slowly by maintaining correct BMI (Body Mass Index) doesn't affect health. "Diet and exercise should be controlled in such a way that only 0.5 to two kilograms is lost per month. Not more. And at all times the minimum BMI should be monitored. A BMI of less than 18.5 is not good," warns Bukht.

"It is important to educate young girls who, under the thrall of fashion, either starve or force themselves to throw up, to follow a healthy lifestyle. Dieting is not bad, but starving takes a sure toll on the body. I think it is awful the way women and young girls are slotted by society because of their weight. There are more important things to worry about than one's body weight," says Dongre.

"And the worst part is that youngsters who come to me with bone related complaints don't realize the root cause of their ailments is their obsession with losing weight. They refuse to believe that they are suffering from osteoporosis and need to eat properly," reveals Srinivas.

Bukht admits that Kareena Kapoor, who reportedly weighs only 48 kilos, as against her ideal minimum weight of 55 kilos, may start developing problems. "And the side effects of achieving size zero within a short period of time are universal. One has to understand that there is no magic pill to lose weight. It has to be done in a controlled way," she says.

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