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Body image perception and weight on a sample of Italian young people

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Abstract- Objective: Investigate the relation between weight and eating disorders, including disorders related to body image.

Study design: A cross-sectional study

Materials and methods: One hundred twenty-three students participated in the study. The Body Uneasiness Test (BUT) and the Eating Attitudes Test (EAT-26) were used. Each subject was classified as underweight ($BMI < 19$), normal weight ($19 \leq BMI \leq 24$), overweight ($25 \leq BMI \leq 30$) and obese ($BMI > 30$). Fisher's exact test or Chi square test was used to compare weight status with sex, or to assess association between categorical variables. Oneway-Anova model was used to compare the BMI categories with the psychological outcomes including body image perception, and eating disorders. Confidential Intervals at 95% were used to assess the prevalence of weight status and the other variables studied.

Results: The prevalence of normal weight people was 67% (95%CI: 59%-75%), 28 subjects were underweight (27 females) and 12 subjects were classified as overweight and obese (11 overweight and 1 obese). Mean scores for EAT scale were not significantly different among the 3 BMI groups ($F=1.57$, $p>0.05$). The Body Image Concerns scale showed that excessive concerns for physical appearance is prevalent in people who are overweight/obese, with a statistical difference between overweight/obese and underweight people (Scheffé test =1.01, $p=0.007$), between overweight/obese and normal weight people (Scheffé test=0.96, $p=0.004$).

Conclusions: The study shows cognitive distortions, rigid attitudes related to the perception of the bodily self and the dissatisfaction with physical appearance in underweight and overweight/obese people.

Key words : BMI, eating disorder, body image perception

INTRODUCTION

Food-related diseases involve the contradiction of cultural models which lead to a systematic and appealing consumption of food, but, at the same time, offer the aesthetic ideal of thinness, which prevails on the honesty of behaviour. A relationship between media literacy and eating disorder risk factors is often observed [1].

The literature reviewed has suggested that underweight and overweight/obese subjects may present more problems related to body image dissatisfaction than normal weight people [2; 3].

It is also assumed that people who are overweight have a higher dissatisfaction and more disorders related to body image than the other two groups.

In fact, in the overweight/obese category is often the clash between real and desired body: different studies suggest a link between body dissatisfaction, unhealthy weight-control behaviors and obesity in both male and female adolescents [4].

Overweight and obesity are complex and multifactorial phenomena, with important implications for physical and mental health [5].

The inability to maintain a "reasonable weight" enhances the risk of developing a real phobia of body weight.

The idea of body shape and body weight often leads to a neutralizing of the effects of ingested food on increasing weight (self-induced vomiting, misuse of diuretics, laxatives, enemas, etc.). This represents a risk factor for the development of eating disorders [6].

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The present study aims to investigate the relationship between Body Mass Index (BMI), eating disorders (DCA) and disorders related to body image.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A cross-sectional study, on a non-randomized sample of students, was carried out.

Each subject reported weight, height and filled in the Body Uneasiness Test (BUT) [7, 8] and the Eating Attitudes Test (EAT-26) [9].

The BUT is a psychometric test for the assessment of body image disturbances, an area of psychopathology which is of particular interest with regards to obese and overweight people. This scale includes cognitive elements, emotional and behavioural attitudes toward body image. The scale explores different areas: body dissatisfaction and weight, avoidance behaviours and compulsive control, feelings of detachment and estrangement from one's own body, specific concerns for some parts, as well as body functions.

The test is divided into two parts: BUT 1 (34 items), the overall average score indicates the degree of severity related to body image, through the Global Severity Index (GSI). If the GSI score is higher than 1.2, the subject is considered at risk of discomfort with his/her body.