

Promoting a Positive Performance Body Culture in Sport: Weight, Body Composition, Food and Nutrition

HPSNZ Internal Information Sheet

The aim of a positive performance body culture in sport is for athletes to develop a positive relationship with food, their bodies and performance supported by all support staff.

Executive Summary:

The following points are critical for promoting a positive performance body culture in sport.

1. All those working in sport have a shared responsibility to contribute to the generation of a positive, safe, and supportive culture that promotes a healthy relationship with the athlete body, food, nutrition, and performance.
2. Frequent weight checking is discouraged and is an unreliable health and performance measure. The collection of body weight by multiple support staff should be avoided.
3. Comparisons between athletes or across sports should not be provided.
4. Establish acceptable language and respectful behaviours in the sport environment that includes the entire sport support team and other staff (e.g. managers, administration and NSO staff) and comply with the HPSNZ Code of Conduct.
5. Acknowledge there are uncontrollable factors influencing body composition including maturation and genetics. Body diversity is embraced as there is no one ideal shape for sport.
6. Challenge and manage (e.g. via the Internal Complaints Framework) the repeated use of negative and harmful language and critical comments around body size, shape, food and behaviours by those interacting with athletes.
7. Nutrition information is evidenced based and delivered by a qualified practitioner (HPSNZ Performance Nutritionist).
8. The purpose and process for the collection of all body measurements must be clearly explained. Consent forms are completed for athletes under 18 years and athlete's new to the techniques and measures (e.g. body composition).
9. Support staff should never assume an athlete is 'okay' in the environment. They should seek confirmation and clarification (including from parents or guardians for athletes under 18 years). A safe and private environment, away from public viewing, is recommended for assessing body measurements and a high level of privacy for conversations with athletes regarding weight and body composition (with a guardian or suitable third party) should be provided.

10. The security and confidential storage of personal data (including body measurements and composition) should be provided. Results are only shared with the athletes (or athlete and parent/guardian for under 18 years) consent

Introduction:

HPSNZ offers individualised advice and support through an intradisciplinary team that may include a Performance Nutritionist, Medical Director, Athlete Life Advisor, Physiologist, Physiotherapist, Psychologist, Performance Analyst and Strength Conditioning staff. The NSO support staff, including Coaches and Managers, also provide advice and support. This document focuses on the shared responsibility and best practice in the use of performance focused positive messages when communicating to supported athletes on their body weight, body composition and food and nutrition information.

Language and behaviours concerning the body can have a substantial effect on self-esteem, performance and wellbeing and may lead to the risk of developing poor body image, damaged relationships with food, disordered eating, eating disorders and mental health issues.

A supportive environment will be sports specific and individual athlete preferences for an open and transparent or a confidential private approach to sharing weight and body related data should be respected. HPSNZ staff and contractors share the responsibility to comply with the Sport NZ and HPSNZ Discrimination, Harassment, Bullying and Victimisation Prevention Policy and the HPSNZ Code of Conduct.

Definition:

Body composition assessment describes what the body is composed of through a series of measures including height, weight, girths, skinfold and breadths where a unit of measurement (or x-ray and scan) is taken and recorded for evaluation and future use (including within individual comparison or documentation).

Performance body refers to the sport specific physical characteristics developed and enhanced for performance. The performance body can be different for each sport and within a sport based on an event, position, weight category or discipline (e.g. shot put v distance runner v pole-vaulter v 200m canoe sprinter v lightweight boxer v goalkeeper) and genetics.

Background

The provision of a safe environment (training, camps, and competition) for athletes of all ages and skill levels, and the avoidance of an adverse impact or harm to health and wellbeing is a high priority. This includes reinforcing messages to the athlete that appearance does not equal success, value and worth. All support staff, coaches and parents have a responsibility when working with athletes to provide supportive positive messaging and language around body mass (weight), body image and shape. This includes comments on nutrition, food intake and meal choices.

Positive Language

Language used towards the body can have a significant impact (both in the short and long term) on the self-esteem, quality of life, health, and the performance of an athlete. Often the comments expressed are intended to be supportive, however there can be unintentional undesirable interpretations, and these are open to perception and expectation by the athlete.

All support staff, coaches, parents, umpires, and judges are encouraged to use positive language (e.g. 'you are strong, good effort, and nice work') when working with an athlete. Focusing on descriptions linked to performance, such as improved speed, enhanced technique, increased stamina, strength benefits, greater skill, less fatigue, more flexibility,

and good recovery moves the attention from the body to the performance. Wording considered to be body descriptors, such as 'fat, overweight, heavy, skinny, large, light, stick thin and chunky' should be avoided.

Specific language and descriptions related to nutrition, including 'dieting, clean eating, good food, bad food, guilty food, binge food, pigging out, naughty treat, been bad, and unhealthy foods' should be avoided. The use of respectful supportive language and terminology (e.g. nutrient density) when referencing form, shape, size, weight, body composition and observations around food choices is recommended. Focusing on food as fuel and to nourish the body assists to align food with supporting performance, wellbeing, and health. The importance of food in the social, cultural, and emotional aspects of an athlete's life should be considered.

Conversations and comments on body mass/weight, body size and related areas should not be made where these could be overheard in a public forum, in front of the athlete, to an athlete in a third person context or in the presence of others (e.g. coaches, athletes, or support staff). Professional and respectful language should always be used to convey body composition information.

Body Composition Assessment

Many factors influence body composition with genetics being an uncontrollable factor (e.g. height, frames dimension and hormonal body fat patterns). Athletes vary in body size and shape, even within the same sport and their physique evolves throughout their career. There is no perfect norm or body type, and body diversity should be embraced. Body weight, mass, type, and size should not be used to compare one athlete to another and never publicly.

Differences exist in the management for a sport involving weight classes (e.g. jockey, lifting and combat sports), competing against gravity (e.g. jumps) and in sports where aesthetics and body shape are judged (e.g. diving and gymnastics). The relationship between body weight and performance is complex and there is no guarantee of performance improvements with weight loss. Advice on the application and limitations of body composition data are best provided by those who are specifically trained in this area. Only an ISAK accredited practitioner should take measurements (see HPSNZ Performance Nutrition Body Composition Protocols). Body composition assessments should never referred to 'Skinnies' or Fat Tests'.

Frequent weight checking (e.g. daily, multiple times a day or in a week) is unreliable and an inaccurate method to assess energy balance and changes in body composition. This can be stressful for the athlete and lead to unhealthy behaviours including skipping meals, restricting fluids and other disordered eating behaviours, especially prior to weigh-in. The collection of body weight by multiple support staff (nutrition, medical, strength & conditioning, physiotherapy and coaching) is to be avoided. Distress around being weighed must be taken seriously.

Body composition recommendations should be individualised and customised to the sport, age, and stage of development of the athlete and with realistic time frames for any recommended alterations. Any nutrition intervention to modify body composition should only be considered where there is support for a critical performance or to support and optimise performance (e.g. enhance lean mass or reducing mass for weight class sports). Anthropometric information should be used in combination with assessments of strength, speed, power, and endurance and not used in isolation (i.e. supported by information and data from the intradisciplinary team).

A clear consent process for body composition is available that includes the dissemination and storage of the data. Data collection should be appropriate for the age and stage of sport

career. Inclusive team protocols should be clearly defined and explained with no individual athlete publicly singled out for body composition assessment. Changes in body composition, regardless of cause (deliberate or unintentional energy restriction, illness, injury, maturation), should be carefully reviewed and discussed.

Maturation and Body Composition

Young athletes are very impressionable, especially in relation to authority figures such as support staff, coaches, and parents. Normalising changes due to maturation, through education and support, to accept the puberty related body composition changes that may influence performance is essential. These changes are temporary and education on muscle growth and development should also be included. All support staff should have context of an athlete's biological age rather than chronological age for growth and development and expect an increase in height, weight, and changes in fat deposition with maturation.

The influence of genetics is an uncontrollable factor (height and hormonal body fat patterns). There is no identifiable body shape, body type or body composition for sport. Embracing body diversity, especially with maturing athletes, helps to normalise the changes in appearance and development. Comments concerning breast development and hip girth should be avoided (including those made in jest or in a joking context). Focusing on performance rather than 'body talk' is desired.

Food Nutrition and Energy Provision

Food and body shaming (such as critique focusing on food choices, eating takeaway and high fat foods, serving sizes, snacking, consuming specific beverages, and clothing tightness) is unacceptable. Food shaming includes the behaviour of criticising someone for eating something that does not match the commenters definition of food that is 'good or healthy'.

Engaging and incorporating the services of a HPSNZ Performance Nutritionist is advised as these practitioners have the qualifications, experience, and expertise to deliver food education and nutrition provision. Support staff and coaches should refrain from passing comments, engaging in discussions on food intake, dietary patterns, food choices, in jest or be 'joking around' regarding food intake and nutrition issues. Terms such as 'fat club' and comments regarding social bingeing of food seek to reinforce negative concepts on weight, body shape and size, and food intake and eating behaviours.

There is a higher prevalence for developing disordered eating in athletes compared to non-athletes and this risk is raised in weight class sports, sports where body weight competes with gravity (e.g. jumps in athletics) and in aesthetic sports. All support staff should be alert for undesirable food behaviours including the adoption of specific diets, excluding food or food groups, skipping meals, and rigid food rules. There is a shared responsibility with the NSO for the prevention and process for early detection of disordered eating in sport.

The energy availability and energy expenditure for an athlete will depend on the position, discipline, or event of the athlete's chosen sport alongside the food the athlete consumes. Nutritional requirements change during the season and life stage and are influenced by illness and injury. Low energy availability and relative energy deficiency in sport (RED-S) significantly negatively impact performance, health, and wellbeing of the athlete. If RED-S and disordered eating occurs this should be treated through the same process as injuries. The focus for nutrition should be to replenish, recover and fuel performance for the athlete and the withholding food and fluids during training is not appropriate. A positive body image is one factor that contributes to the prevention of the development of eating disorders in both male and female athletes.

An awareness of the use of supplements and medications related to body composition manipulation is needed (supported by the HPSNZ Performance Nutrition and Medical teams) for all support staff. This includes the use of diet and weight loss pills, diuretics, appetite suppressants, laxatives, metabolism elevators (fat burners, stimulants), and formulations for promoting nutrient malabsorption (fat binding agents). This also applies to weight gain formulations, especially those promoting increasing lean mass and creating a '6 pack'. Education on weight related products, supplements and risks for an anti-doping violation are encouraged for all those interacting with supported athletes.

Recommendation to HPSNZ Staff Supporting a Positive Performance Body Culture around Weight, Body Composition, Food and Nutrition.

1. Support team members should be sensitive to the feelings of athletes and how they may interpret and respond to comments concerning their body and show high awareness of the impact comments, language and behaviour may have on athletes in relation to body composition, body image, health and wellbeing.
2. Identify and promote improvements in sport performance are associated with training and skill performance aspects and not to success in weight loss or lower anthropometric measurements.
3. The services of experienced practitioners (HPSNZ Performance Nutritionist with ISAK Accreditation) are engaged.
4. The role of food in the enjoyment of life and wellbeing in addition to performance and that food is both fuel and nourishment for the body should be reinforced.
5. Body composition discussions are related to health and/or specific performance benefits and not to image or aesthetics.
6. Athlete history of eating patterns, hydration, disordered eating, and factors contributing to weight control is understood.
7. Education on the risks of weight manipulation methods (loss and gain) and to recognise the early signs and symptoms of disordered eating is received.
8. RED-S and Disordered Eating behaviours should be supported the same as other injuries and include support from Medical, Nutrition, Psychology, disordered eating clinics and Athlete Life as necessary, with concise referral pathways
9. Negative body language and critical comments are challenged. Reporting processes for poor and repetitive negative behaviours (including food and body shaming) are available (e.g. HPSNZ DHBV Prevention policy).
10. Encourage athletes to receive a physical exam/assessment with a their HPSNZ Medical Director.

HPSNZ Supporting documents (available on KS):

- HPSNZ Code Conduct
- Sports NZ and HPSNZ Discrimination, Harassment, Bullying and Victimisation Prevention Policy
- HPSNZ Performance Nutrition: HPSNZ Performance Nutrition Body Composition Protocols and Guidelines for First Time, Paralympic and Under 18 year old athletes
- HPSNZ Performance Nutrition: Consent form for Body Composition Assessment U18 Athletes
- HPSNZ Performance Nutrition: Athlete Consent form for Body Composition Assessment
- HPSNZ Performance Nutrition: Athlete Body Composition Information Sheet 2020

Resources and References

- Gymnastics Australia Body Positive Guidelines
https://www.gymnastics.org.au/Ga/Athletes/Body_Positive.aspx
- USA Gymnastics Safe Sport Policy <https://usagym.org/pages/education/safesport/policy.html>
- SDA: Creating a Positive Performance Culture
- Webinar: How to Navigate the Topics of Gymnast Nutrition, Weight, and Body Image as a Coach or Parent: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hFDfwrM4oB8&feature=youtu.be>
- The Australian Institute of Sport and National Eating Disorders Collaboration Position Statement on Disordered Eating in High Performance Sport. Wells KR, et al., Br J Spt Med 2020;0;1-13.
- IOC consensus statement: harassment and abuse (non-accidental violence) in sport, 2016
https://stillmed.olympic.org/media/Document%20Library/OlympicOrg/IOC/What-We-Do/Protecting-Clean-Athletes/Safeguarding/IOC-Consensus-Statement_Harassment-and-abuse-in-sport-2016.pdf#_ga=2.20166398.797311194.1597723973-2058518609.1597723973
- USA Softball
<https://www.teamusa.org/USA-Softball/News/2020/June/01/How-to-Develop-Positive-Body-Image-on-Team>