



SKATECANADA

# BODY POSITIVE

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## GUIDELINES

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## INTRODUCTION

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One of Skate Canada's goals is a commitment to athlete health, performance, and wellbeing. Foundational to this goal is ensuring that all participants have an environment that is safe and inclusive. Skate Canada strives for excellence in competitive success and sets a high priority on ensuring physical, psychological, and emotional safety and wellbeing for its members. As a result, Skate Canada aims to be a national and world leading safe sport organization. The Body Positive Guidelines are essential to ensure that everyone within the organization has a clear understanding of what factors can impact body image, how changes unfold with growth and development, and that everyone involved with the athlete can promote a healthy and safe training and competition environment.

All athletes, coaches, families, officials, volunteers, and staff should have a training or working environment where individuals and their bodies are spoken to, spoken about, and treated with care and respect. The language we use towards our body and the bodies of others can have a large impact on the perceptions and feelings an individual may hold about their body. Frequently, these perceptions and feelings can impact an individual's overall wellbeing, psychological, and physical health.

These guidelines aim to set boundaries on what is acceptable practice, language and behaviour for coaches, parents, officials, volunteers, and staff when working with athletes of all ages, genders, and skating abilities. These boundaries apply to environments that are inclusive of, but not limited to, the daily training environment, training camps, team travel, and competitions. The Body Positive Guidelines are an important tool to facilitate the creation of positive, inclusive, and respectful environments for all athletes, and are in line with **Skate Canada's National Safe Sport Program**. Creating training and competition environments that are concerned with the promotion of athlete wellbeing will also prove beneficial for the emotional, psychological, and physical health of our athletes outside the world of sport.

Figure skating has struggled with issues associated with body image and disordered eating due in part to sport performance demands, the nature of a judged aesthetic sport, and thoughts and feelings about the body of an

athlete. Rarely are there clear-cut answers and there is no one size fits all approach when tackling these issues. Despite the best of intentions, words, actions, information, and advice can be potentially damaging to the athlete's wellbeing, development, and performance. The goal of this document is to provide guidelines when dealing with these sensitive topics and issues surrounding the body.

Skate Canada recognizes that shifting the mindset and language of individuals can be challenging. However, it is vital to ensure that appropriate communication occurs around these topics to improve training and competition environments for all athletes.

## BACKGROUND / RATIONALE

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This document is a work in progress. As research continues to further the understanding of body image in sport, this document will evolve with new knowledge in the field.

The Body Positive Guidelines are available publicly. These guidelines should be reviewed annually and be adhered to by all Skate Canada stakeholders. It is expected that Skate Canada as well as all clubs, schools, and sections make every reasonable effort to align their culture, programs, and behaviours with the recommendations contained in the Body Positive Guidelines. This document and further education in this area is critical to ensure that the sport of figure skating offers a safe and positive environment for all participants to have positive experience and to reach their potential.

## WHAT IS BODY IMAGE?

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Body image refers to thoughts, feelings, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours an individual holds towards their body (Cash, 2004). Body image is made up of many distinct features; however, most discussed are positive and negative body image. The Body Positive Guidelines hope to aid in fostering positive body image while minimizing negative body image.

## POSITIVE BODY IMAGE

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To promote positive body image, it is important to understand the components of both positive and negative body image. According to experts (Woods-Barcalow et al., 2010), positive body image includes:

- The appreciation of one's unique body and functions.
- Acceptance of one's body.
- Feeling comfortable, confident, and happy with one's body.
- Emphasis on one's body's assets rather than imperfections.
- The interpretation of information about and towards one's body in a positive way.

Research has shown that positive body image is protective against certain negative physical and psychological health factors (Gillen, 2015). Positive body image has been seen to increase self-care behaviours, is associated with higher levels of self-esteem, and is also related to a decrease in depressive symptoms. In addition, positive body image can also protect against factors associated with harmful dieting behaviours and disordered eating (e.g. body dissatisfaction and drive for thinness) (Gillen, 2015).

Negative body image can be conceptualized as dissatisfaction, preoccupation, concern, or distress about one's body (Thompson et al., 1999). Individuals experiencing negative body image are at an increased risk for emotional distress, negative self-conscious emotions, and disordered eating attitudes (Thompson et al., 1999).

Athletes are at an increased risk for experiencing negative body image especially those in aesthetic sports such as figure skating, gymnastics, and diving (Greenleaf, Petrie, Carter & Reel, 2009). Due to the demands of the sport (form fitting uniforms, judged components, etc.) an individual's body is often on display. As a result, athletes may experience scrutiny about their bodies from coaches, judges, family members, and peers (Petrie & Greenleaf, 2012). In addition, there may be a contrast between how an athletes' body looks for sport performance compared to how it fits with unrealistic and unattainable societal beauty standards (Petrie & Greenleaf, 2012). We are bombarded with images through TV, magazines, social media, and advertising that promote unrealistic, unobtainable, and highly stylized appearance ideals. At times, those who do not feel as though they meet those standards may experience symptoms associated with negative body image (body dissatisfaction, self-conscious emotions, disordered eating, etc.) which are often detrimental to

an individuals' psychological and physical health as well as their performance (Streigel-Moore & Bulik, 2007).

Body image concerns are primarily an issue for young people (13 to 24 years of age) (DSM-5, 2013). Given the early specialization required in figure skating, athletes may find themselves at an increased risk. Negative body image and disordered eating can affect males as well as females and as such, there should be sensitivity across all genders.

It is recommended that experienced professionals (outlined in Appendix A) be involved to support the mental and physical delivery of training, conditioning, nutrition, mental performance, and rest and recovery. Addressing the circumstances of athlete physical appearance and weight management are extremely difficult and sensitive and there is no straightforward answer. There are several things to consider and implement to achieve the best outcome for the health and wellbeing of the skater. Understanding the developmental age of the athlete, their fueling and nutrition habits, planned and purposeful training and assessments will help to support a positive body image.

## GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

Growth, maturation and development, something all individuals experience, is a complex interaction of hormones, nutrients, and genetics. Puberty is characterized by numerous physical changes including height, deposition of fat, bone and muscle, transformation of the brain and acquisition of secondary sex characteristics (Wheeler, 1991). The rate of a child's growth has significant implications to their physical training, both positive and negative. It is not unusual for performance to be affected by these changes. For more information about growth and development, refer to the **Canadian Sport for Life Long-Term Development in Sport and Physical Activity resource** and Skate Canada's Guide to Long-Term Development.

It should be recognized that weight gain and/or changes in body composition is a natural part of growth and development. The development of the athlete's body is influenced through a combination of genetics, training, nutrition, and the environment. If concerns arise about an athlete's growth, coaches should refer the athlete to a qualified professional – physician, sport dietitian, etc. – who will consult with the athlete (see Appendix A).

## BODY COMPOSITION ASSESSMENTS

The primary purpose for body composition assessment is to measure growth and development of the athlete and to monitor changes as it relates to training and performance. Such measures can be used to provide a complete picture of an athlete's current growth and maturation so training, competition and recovery programs can be appropriately designed based on developmental age not just chronological age of the athlete. For mature athletes, body composition measures can be used to help guide programming both on and off ice to optimize performance (Balyi et al., 2013).

Body composition assessments may include the measurement of height, weight, limb lengths, bone breadths, arm span, girths and/or skinfolds. All body composition measures should only be conducted by an experienced and certified anthropometrist (see Appendix A). This testing should only be conducted after the delivery of an adequate education session and once written consent has been received from the athlete and/or parent/guardian if the athlete is under the age of 18.

It is recommended that for athletes under the age of 16, body composition measures are used to monitor growth and development. The objective of body composition assessments for athletes that are over the age of 16 is to continue to monitor growth and development along with health and performance.

Skate Canada does not condone coaches or staff weighing athletes in the daily training environment. A health professional or anthropometrist should be the only person who monitors weight and body composition.

## NUTRITION

Proper nutrition and adequate fueling is critical for an athlete's growth and maturation, overall health, and performance. If there are ever any concerns about an athlete's nutrition plan or eating habits it is imperative to consult with a qualified nutrition professional (see Appendix A). There is ever-growing information and misinformation regarding nutrition that is easy to access and misuse. Athletes are often caught between conflicting philosophies on food, nutrition, and how to fuel their bodies for sport. For proper guidance on the creation and

monitoring of nutrition plans, it is important to seek a qualified nutrition professional (see Appendix A).

There is significant difference between promoting healthy eating and promoting restrictive eating. Individuals may be involved in specific nutrition plans that monitor their food consumption. While these nutrition management plans are sometimes necessary, when taken to an extreme they may promote disordered eating behaviours and be detrimental to psychological wellbeing.

Appropriately fueling the body ensures an athlete can manage various training load, adapt to phases of training cycles, and meet the competition demands of a season. If an athlete's energy consumption is insufficient, the impact on performance can be profound. Not only is performance impacted, but more importantly, many necessary health functions of the body are impaired due to under fuelling (i.e. bone health, cardiovascular function, menstruation, immunity). The Female Athlete Triad and Relative Energy Deficiency in Sport (RED-S) are syndromes that outline consequences of low energy availability (King, 2005). The diagrams below illustrate health consequences of both RED-S and the Female Athlete Triad (Mountjoy et al, 2014). While the Female Athlete Triad currently addresses the impact on bone, menstrual function and eating issues in females, RED-S addresses that any athlete can experience the negative consequences of under fuelling (i.e. both males and females). RED-S also explains how low energy availability may impair other systems in the body and performance.

**Figure 1. Health Consequences of Relative Energy Deficient in Sport**

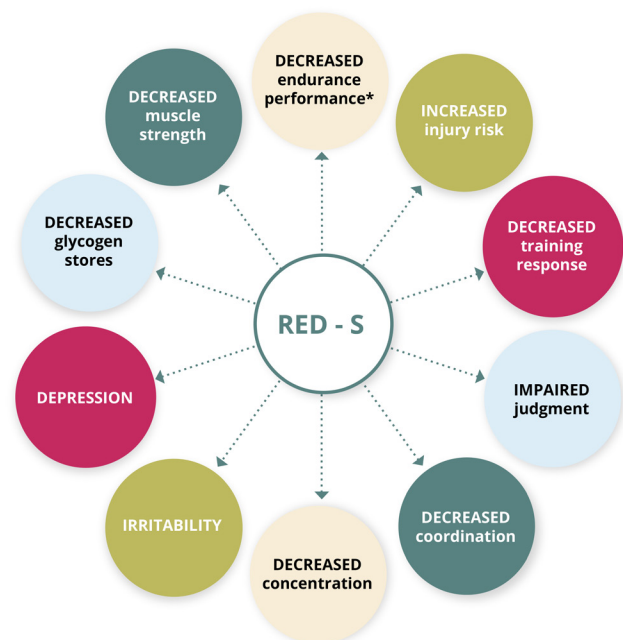
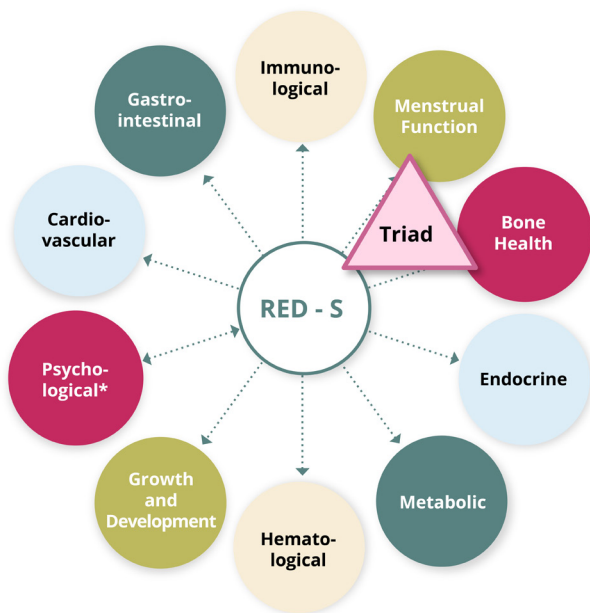


Figure 2. Symptoms of the Female Athlete Triad placed within RED-S



## TRAINING

Skaters must combine a diverse range of skills with increasing levels of technical difficulty and presentation for the duration of a 2-4 minute program. To master the technical difficulties and complete the volume of training required to be competitive, skaters must continue to make advances in their physical capabilities, such as cardiovascular fitness, flexibility, strength, and power (King, 2005) as deemed appropriate for their level of growth and maturation (refer to Skate Canada’s Guide to Long-Term Development). As a result, off-ice training should be structured based on developmental age rather than chronological age.

Off-ice training (including but not limited to strength, speed, stability, cardiovascular, and recovery modalities) may assist in the mitigation of injuries that can be a repercussion of the large number of jumps, lifts and spins that are part of daily on-ice training. Developing sound structural tolerance, or the athlete’s ability to withstand the impact of daily training, can be a key component in maintaining the health of the skater and extending the longevity of the athlete’s career. The volume of off-ice training should be monitored to ensure that the overall load on an athlete is still appropriate for the age and maturation status of the athlete.

## COMMUNICATION AND LANGUAGE

Disordered eating refers to a continuum of maladaptive feeding and eating behaviours that include dieting, restrictive eating, sub-clinical, and clinical eating disorders. It can often be difficult to identify if an athlete is experiencing disordered eating or is struggling with negative body image as the symptoms are not always visible to those around. It is not simply the eating behaviours that are of concern regarding disordered eating, but rather the thoughts, feelings, and perceptions about the body that can motivate this behaviour. The ideas an athlete may hold about their body can be heavily influenced by those around them. Though usually well intentioned, comments made by peers, coaches, parents, officials, and staff can hold enormous amounts of influence (McCann, 2007). With this in mind, it is important to be mindful about the way in which we speak about and towards an individual and their body. For example, a casual comment of: “athlete A has the perfect body for skating” could be interpreted negatively and could result in an athlete believing that to be successful that is the only body type accepted.

All adults and especially coaches have tremendous power over the athlete(s), do not underestimate the influence that you have. As outlined in the National Safe Sport Policy please review the definitions of harassment and bullying:

**Bullying (and/or abusive behaviour)** means unwanted physical, verbal or psychological acts, or other objectional conduct (in person and/or online/cyberbullying) by a person, deliberately or subconsciously, that is intended to ridicule, belittle, alienate or humiliate another person irrespective of the persons’ hierarchical position with relation to the other person.

**Harassment** means any vexatious comments, conduct, behaviour, actions or gestures that are committed, threatened or attempted against another person that are insulting, intimidating, demeaning, malicious or offensive, where the person knows or ought reasonably to know that such behaviour or comments are unwelcome, including but not limited to sexual harassment, and criminal harassment as defined in the Criminal Code in force and effect and as amended from time to time, which includes prohibited conduct

that causes the other person reasonably, in the circumstances, to fear for their safety or the safety of anyone known to them.

As indicated throughout this document, the intent is to do no harm. As a result, it is essential that everyone be vigilant in the awareness of the comments and feedback that is provided to the athlete(s).

All individuals/bodies are to be addressed with respect and harmful language is to be avoided. Examples of how to give a factual, performance-based feedback, rather than commenting on the skater's physical appearance can be found in Appendix B. Below are some practical recommendations of appropriate communication and language.

1. Every reasonable effort must be made to avoid directly critiquing or commenting on the physical appearance, shape, size, or weight of an athlete – regardless of whether it is believed to be “true” or “helpful”. Consider ways to communicate more functional, or supportive messages which encourage all athletes to care for and listen to their bodies.
2. Words like “fat”, “overweight”, “large”, “heavy”, “skinny”, or “stick thin”, can be hurtful and should not be used to describe an athlete's body (and other terms related to body shaming/bullying). Moreover, words like “toned” and “lean” can also perpetuate body preoccupation and should be avoided. These terms are not to be used to communicate directly to or about the athlete. Language and word choices have an impact. Use words sensitively and non-judgementally. Focus on performance and fitness rather than appearance and weight.
3. Both praise and criticism for body appearance, shape, size, or weight may be harmful. Avoid commenting on bodies, and instead praise skill, execution, power, strength, effort, persistence, or other attributes that are not appearance-based.
4. Conversations about athlete's bodies (regardless of whether this is praise or criticism) in front of other individuals, are to be avoided. Comparisons are not constructive and can be harmful to the athlete in question, as well as to any other athlete who may hear the conversation.
5. Avoid conversations with coaches or staff about bodies or eating habits of athletes or staff, in front

of athletes. These conversations for performance and/or wellbeing, should be kept private and involve the appropriate health professional (see Appendix A).

6. Be aware that as an individual in a position of power, the thoughts and feelings about your body, food consumption, weight and how you speak about them will impact others around you. Avoid discussing personal details with athletes.
7. Please consider that the delivery of a comment and/or message may be received differently to how it is intended. Individuals should be thoughtful and considerate about personal circumstances, cultural differences, characteristics, and experiences of each individual, which may influence the interpretation of the message.

## PREVENTION

There are many things that can be done to reduce disordered eating and promote positive body image in sport. Given that body image is a complex issue made up of many factors, different approaches and resources for prevention should be considered. These can range from screening tools, nutrition planning, educational resources, and self-compassion workshops. Due to the complexity of body image in sport, a unified front to decrease the risk of negative body image and disordered eating in our athletes requires buy in from officials, staff, coaches, parents, and teammates.

Athletes should annually receive a pre-participation examination performed by a qualified sport medicine physician (IOC, 2009). This is the best way to detect any potential medical conditions and reduce the risk of potential health issues with a growing athlete.

Furthermore, there are important factors that can help to promote positive athlete growth such as:

1. Positive, person oriented coaching style.
2. Positive social influence and support from teammates, coaches, families, officials, and staff with healthy attitudes towards every size and shape.
3. Coaches who emphasize factors that contribute to personal success, such as motivation and effort rather than body weight or shape.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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If you have questions regarding these guidelines, please contact Skate Canada's safe sport department at [safesport@skatecanada.ca](mailto:safesport@skatecanada.ca) or 1-888-747-2372 ext: 703.

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Given the purpose of these guidelines, language in this document is used with the intention to highlight and focus on an individual's body. The body is only one aspect of an individual's self concept. As such, language used purposefully centres the body throughout the document.

In addition, this document does not address body image concerns specifically for athletes with disabilities. As this is a growing and changing document, including needs for this specific population may be included in future iterations.



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## APPENDIX A:

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### Resources for Education, Intervention and Treatment

There are many resources that can be tapped into for support regarding body image and disordered eating in sport. As you are looking for a professional, please do your due diligence in terms of asking about sport specific experience, certifications as well as education. Information on professional assistance and education are listed below:

- To find a sports dietitian in your area consult (use filters such as athlete or sport) [https://members.dietitians.ca/DCMember/s/find-dietitian?language=en\\_US](https://members.dietitians.ca/DCMember/s/find-dietitian?language=en_US).
- To find a psychologist in your area consult your provincial psychological association. For example, [www.psych.on.ca](http://www.psych.on.ca).
- To find a mental performance consultant in your area consult: [www.cspa.acps.com](http://www.cspa.acps.com).
- To find an anthropometrist: <https://www.isak.global/MemberList/Index>.
- To find a sports medicine physician in your area consult: <https://casem-acmse.org/public-directory/find-a-sport-medicine-doctor/>.
- When finding a strength and conditioning coach in your area be sure to check their certifications, experience, and ask for references.
- Athletes coaches and parents support staff can contact Skate Canada at **1-888-747-2372** if they have any questions or concerns.
- Body Image and Sport: <https://www.bodysense.ca/tools>
- National Eating Disorder Information Centre (NEDIC): <https://www.nedic.ca>.
- Canadian Centre for Mental Health in Sport (CCMHS): <https://www.ccmhs-ccsms.ca/>.
- Association for Applied Sport Psychology: <https://appliedsportpsych.org/resources/health-fitness-resources/body-image-and-physical-activity/>.
- Self-Compassion: <https://self-compassion.org/>.
- Body Project Collaborative: <http://www.bodyprojectsupport.org/home>.

## APPENDIX B:

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### Guide for Navigating Body-Related Athlete Concerns:

Examples on how to give a factual, performance-based report, rather than commenting on the skater's physical appearance:

1. Body composition measurements can be a point of concern or distress for some athletes. Taking steps to make athletes comfortable with the process is important. Referring to the guidelines, inform athletes about the purpose of the measures using language like “we measure growth and body composition to make sure you are **growing in a healthy way** this will help maximize your performance and reduce your risk of injury”.
2. If an athlete expresses concerns related to negative body image, efforts should be made to normalize these feelings by letting them know they are not alone in having thoughts like this. While the initial instinct may be to respond to the athlete with comments like “Don't think like that”, “You don't need to be worried about your body” these comments may dismiss the athlete's feelings. Instead, statements like “**I hear you**”, “That must be really difficult” and “What can I do to support you” can be followed up with conversations about support systems and resources listed in Appendix A.
3. Instead of using words to praise athletes like “toned”, “lean” “shredded” shift the focus to **performance-based compliments** like “You look really confident in that skill” or “I can see you have been working hard in your off-ice training and it is really paying off in your skating”.
4. Often times changes to the body during an athlete's growth and maturation may impact an athlete's performance and ability to execute certain skills. Reassure athletes that changes during **puberty** are normal. Support during this already challenging time in a young person's life is important. Try to be encouraging and accepting. Refer to resources in Appendix A that may help the athlete navigate this time.
5. Comments about an athlete's weight or shape outside the context of body composition assessments done by anthropometrics or medical professionals are to be avoided.
6. Negative comments that use the body as a tool for coaching should be avoided. Instead of statements like “landing heavy” “chicken-legs” “spaghetti arms” etc., effective coaching techniques that use **specific performance-based language** to adjust skills should be used, eg. “straighten your leg”, “bend your knees”, “check your arms” etc.