

# Weight status and body image of young adolescents

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## Introduction

Overweight and obesity in particular cause and aggravate many non-communicable diseases and have significant negative psychosocial and educational consequences. Severe underweight, on the other hand, can be the manifestation of prolonged dietary restrictions, or even pathologies such as eating disorders. For these reasons, they must be prevented as early as in childhood.

Young adolescents undergo significant bodily changes, which influence their emotional, cognitive and psychosocial development. During puberty, the metamorphosis of their silhouette forces them to reshape their body image, and for some, this can be a major source of dissatisfaction and malaise.

This information sheet presents a selection of results from the HBSC 2022 survey in Switzerland for pupils aged 11 to 15 on weight status, perceived body weight, body image and perceived need to lose weight.

## The method in short

The international study *Health Behaviour in School-aged Children* (HBSC) is conducted every four years under the aegis of the World Health Organisation (WHO-Europe). In Switzerland, the study has been conducted by Addiction Switzerland since 1986 and is funded by the Federal Office of Public Health (FOPH) and most of the cantons.

It is a nationally representative monitoring study of health and health behaviours in adolescents aged 11 to 15. In 2022, 857 classes in the 5th to 9th grades (7th to 11th year HarmoS) were randomly selected in Switzerland, and 636 classes participated in the survey (9'345 schoolchildren aged 11 to 15), which equals a participation rate of 74.2%.

The survey is based on a standardised self-administered paper questionnaire, completed in the classroom between March and June 2022. Participation was voluntary (with parental consent), and answers were strictly confidential.

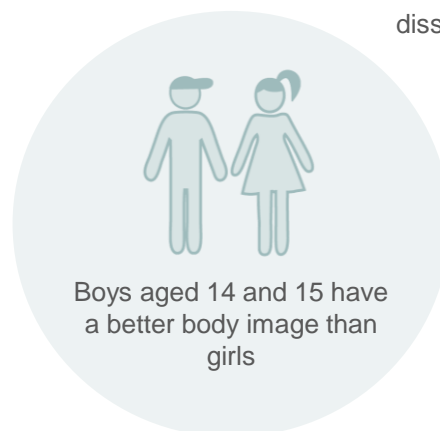
The sex/gender analyses are thus based on the international question 'Are you a boy or a girl?'. Therefore, it is not possible to know whether students answered the question with reference to their sex assigned at birth or their gender identity.

⚠ Given the cross-sectional nature of the HBSC study, a statistical association between two indicators does not allow us to conclude that one influences the other (or vice versa) in the sense of a cause-effect relationship.

## Key figures 2022

~14% of 11- to 15-year-olds are slightly to severely underweight

~13% of 11- to 15-year-olds are overweight (overweight and obesity taken together)

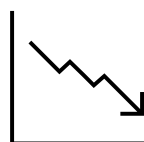


Boys aged 14 and 15 have a better body image than girls

~51% of 11- to 15-year-olds are dissatisfied with their body weight

~14% of 11- to 15-year-olds are dieting or doing something else to lose weight

~69% of 14- and 15-year-olds tend to agree or agree with the statement that they are satisfied with their physical appearance



Unfavorable trends in body image, especially amongst girls

## Body Mass Index (BMI)

In 2022, according to the BMI, around **73% of 11- to 15-year-olds** have a **normal weight**, **~11% are slightly underweight**, **~3% are moderately to severely underweight**, **~11% are overweight** and **~2% are obese**.

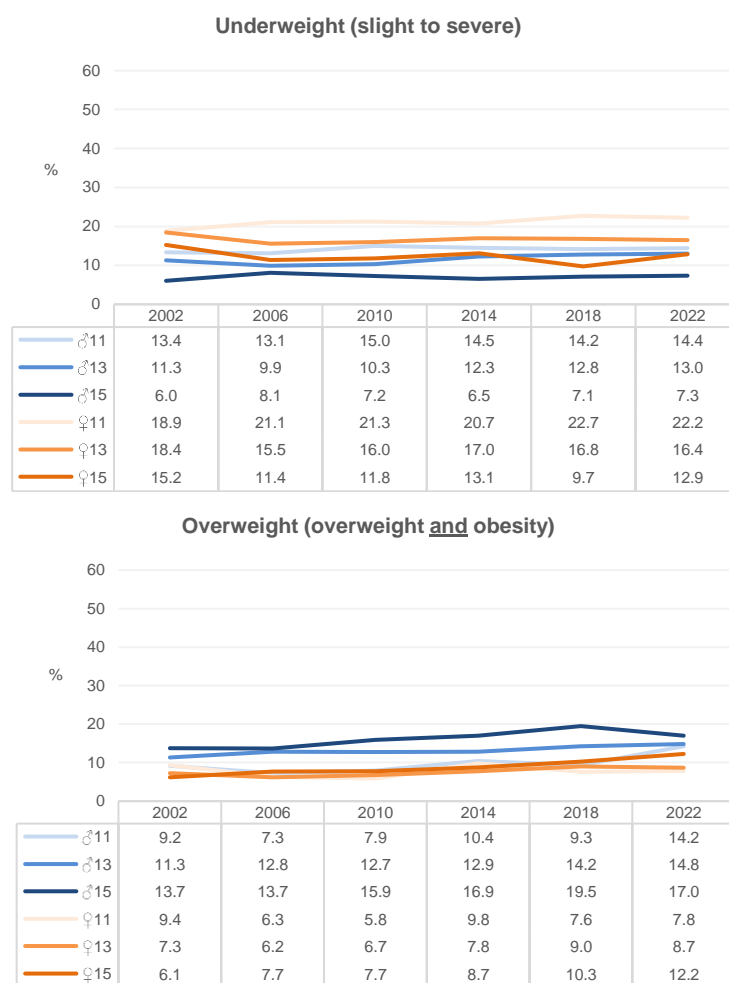
Amongst 11- to 15-year-olds, mild to severe underweight (**~14%**) is more prevalent amongst girls (B: **~11%**; G: **~14%**), whilst overweight (overweight and obesity considered together; **~13%**) is more prevalent amongst boys (B: **~16%**; G: **~10%**). Underweight is decreasing between 11- and 15-year-olds, whilst overweight is increasing.

Amongst 11- to 15-year-olds, **prevalences are close** to those recorded in **2018**. However, there has been an increase in mild to severe underweight amongst 15-year-old girls, and in overweight (overweight and obesity considered together) amongst 11-year-old boys.



In the HBSC study, the Body Mass Index [BMI = weight in kg/(height in m)<sup>2</sup>] is **estimated** based on the student's self-reports and not on actual measurements of weight and height. The weight status was assessed using the International Obesity Task Force's (IOTF) BMI thresholds for under 18-year-olds.

**Figure I - Overweight (overweight and obesity) and underweight (slight to severe) (HBSC)**



## Body weight perception

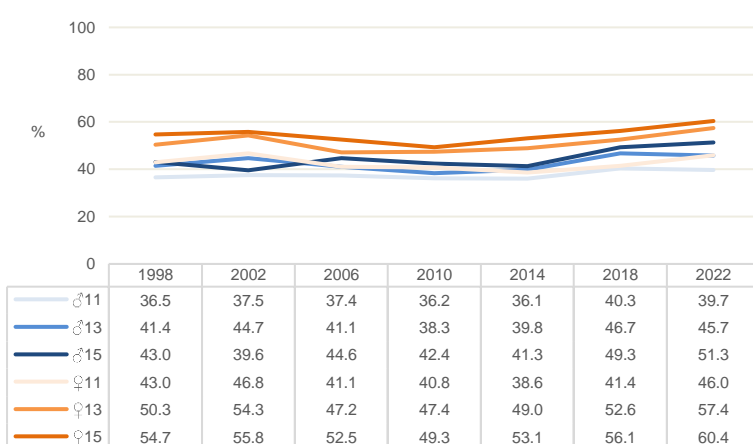
In 2022, **~49% of 11- to 15-year-olds** (B: **~54%**; G: **~44%**) **considered themselves to be around the right weight**. **~29%** felt slightly too fat and **~5%** much **too fat** (mostly girls), whilst **~15%** felt slightly too thin and **~3%** much **too thin** (mostly boys).

Overall, **dissatisfaction with body weight (~51%)** is greater amongst girls (**~56%**) than boys (**~46%**). Compared to 2018 (48%), it has **increased amongst girls** and remained **stable amongst boys**.

Analyses conducted only amongst **15-year-olds** show that there is **often a mismatch between perceived body weight and BMI**. Underestimating body weight is more common amongst boys, whilst overestimating is more common amongst girls.

**Dissatisfaction** with body weight is **negatively associated with well-being** (life satisfaction, self-rated health, emotional well-being<sup>a</sup>) and **positively associated with frequency of using social media**.

**Figure II - Percentage of 11-, 13- and 15-year-olds dissatisfied with their body weight (HBSC)**

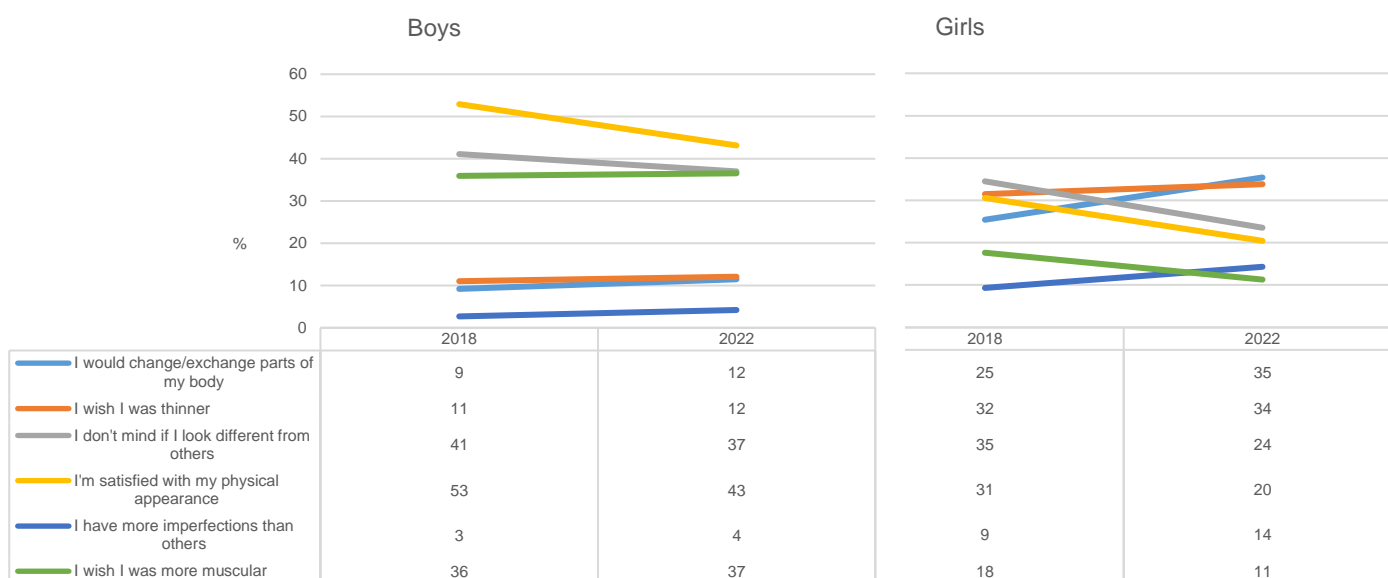


### Perceived need to lose weight

In 2022, at the time of the survey, **~14% of 11- to 15-year-olds** (B: **~11%**; G: **~16%**) **were dieting or doing something else to lose weight**. This rate, which has remained at a similar level since 2002, tends to increase between ages 11 and 15 amongst girls, whilst remaining stable amongst boys.

Note: <sup>a</sup> For results regarding these three indicators, see the HBSC 2022 factsheet dedicated to health and well-being.

**Figure III - Percentage of 14- and 15-year-olds who agree<sup>a</sup> with the following statements about their body image (HBSC)**



Notes: The results (totals) presented in this table are based on unweighted data and therefore presented for general orientation only.

<sup>a</sup> The other response categories were: 'somewhat agree', 'somewhat don't agree', 'don't agree'.

**Body image** can be defined as the subjective, individual mental image we have of our own appearance. It has many facets, including satisfaction and acceptance of one's own body.

Figure III shows, for each of the six statements, **the proportion of 14- and 15-year-olds who agree** with them ('somewhat agree' is not taken into account). Overall, body image has **deteriorated** compared to 2018, especially amongst girls<sup>b</sup>.

In 2022, boys appear to be more satisfied with their physical appearance than girls, with one exception: more boys would like to be more muscular.

Note: <sup>b</sup> This is also the case if we take into account the 'tend to agree' and 'agree' responses.

## More results

Delgrande Jordan, M, Schmidhauser, V. et Balsiger, N. (2023). Santé et bien-être des 11 à 15 ans en Suisse – Situation en 2022, évolution dans le temps et corrélats – Résultats de l'étude Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) (rapport de recherche No 159). Lausanne: Addiction Suisse. With summary in English.

Statistical standard tables on the website [www.hbsc.ch](http://www.hbsc.ch)

## Acknowledgements

Our thanks go to the students, parents and teachers who, by agreeing to take part in the survey, contributed to an essential part of this project.

## Promoting healthy body weight and positive body image

It is important for their current and future health to help young people **maintain a healthy body weight** by promoting physical activity and a healthy, balanced diet. Those who are overweight (particularly obese) should also be made aware of the help available, so that they can benefit from specialized support, advice and guidance when weight loss is indicated. (Severe) underweight, because it can be the manifestation of an eating disorder, should be given equal attention.

It's also important **to promote a positive body image** and help young people accept their bodies as they are and to encourage them to (re)connect with their sensations rather than focusing on their appearance. In particular, we need to help them take a critical look at the body ideals (out of touch with reality) spread on social media.