

Japan's slimmers pay for obsession - Jonathan Watts in Tokyo

Weighing in at less than 51kg and standing 1.63m tall, the average 20-year-old Japanese woman possesses the sort of svelte figure that any weight-conscious Bridget Jones could only dream of. But that has not stopped increasing numbers of Japanese - average or otherwise - turning to potentially deadly diet pills to get closer to the stick-like ideal represented by international fashion models and a growing number of their domestic idols.

Five people have died and almost 500 have fallen ill after taking the dangerous and poorly regulated herbal slimming aids from China, according to reports in recent weeks that have highlighted the fatal consequences of Japan's dieting obsession. The latest victim was a man who had been taking a brand of the pills not previously identified as potentially dangerous. Last week China banned eight diet drugs containing fenfluramine Π an appetite-suppressant that has been associated with heart valve problems and possibly liver failure. It has also been linked to a number of deaths in Asia. Japan's health ministry has issued warnings about 14 brands of imported diet aids, the police have arrested one retailer, and the Tokyo municipal government has ordered shops to withdraw two similar products.

Famous for a low-fat diet of fish, seaweed and green tea, Japan has long been credited with a lifestyle that keeps tummies trim and cholesterol levels low. But such healthy habits have been changing as the popularity of fatty Western food sends waistlines outwards,

even as the media and fashion industries apply psychological pressure in the opposite direction. Research by the Japanese health ministry suggests that the growth of the burger-and-fries industry has increased obesity in men. But women, subjected to a bombardment of advertisements extolling the desirability of thinness have been steadily losing weight relative to their height since the 1950s. As in Singapore, South Korea and China - where the pills are also reported to have caused fatalities - this is partly because growing Asian affluence and Western influence have changed attitudes.

For many young Japanese women, the ideal body shape is represented by the petite pop idol Namie Amuro, who weighs less than 41kg. "Thin is in," said Naoko Matsui, a 26-year-old from Tokyo sporting the skin-tight jeans that are all the rage this summer. "Watching TV and reading magazines, I feel the pressure to lose weight is definitely stronger now than 10 years ago."

The consequences are becoming increasingly apparent. In May a government-funded study found that 5% of girls in Tokyo junior schools have suffered from anorexia nervosa. Reports of eating disorders have risen tenfold since 1980. Psychologists say this is a global trend, but one accelerated in Japan because women's value in society is determined more by appearance and age than in Western nations.

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1. True or False?

1. The average 20-year-old Japanese woman weighs less than 51kg.
2. Imported herbal slimming aids have killed over 500 people in Japan.
3. The typical Japanese diet of fish, seaweed and green tea is low in fat and very healthy.
4. The introduction of western fast foods has led to increased obesity in women in Japan.
5. Advertisements in the media put pressure on girls to lose weight.
6. Cases of people suffering from eating disorders have risen by 100% since 1980.

2. Comprehension check - reformulation

Match the beginnings in the left-hand column with the endings in the right-hand column:

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. Young Japanese women take hungry. herbal slimming aids | a. stops you feeling |
| 2. Some people have died | b. has led to increased obesity. |
| 3. Fenfluramine | c. because people have grown richer. |
| 4. Fish, seaweed and green tea | d. because of pressure to be even thinner. |
| 5. The increase in Western fast-foods | e. put pressure on young women. |
| 6. The media and fashion industries | f. has suffered from anorexia nervosa. |
| 7. Many young women | g. weighs much less than average. |
| 8. Attitudes in Asia have changed | h. because the herbal aids are dangerous. |
| 9. The singer Namie Amuro | i. feel they have to be even thinner. |
| 10. One in 20 girls in Tokyo junior schools | j. are part of a very healthy diet. |

3. Guess the answer

- The average 20-year-old Japanese woman weighs:*
a. 41kg b. 51kg c. 61kg
- The average height of a 20-year-old Japanese woman is:*
a. 1.53m b. 1.58m c. 1.63m
- How many people in Japan have died from taking herbal slimming aids?*
a. 50 000 b. 50 c. 500
- Which of the following is responsible for the healthy, low-fat diet in Japan:*
a. burgers and fries b. herbal slimming aids c. fish
- The pop singer Namie Amuro is an idol for many young Japanese women. How much does she weigh?*
a. 41kg b. 51kg c. 61kg
- Since 1980, the number of cases of eating disorders in Japan has increased by:*
a. 10% b. 100% c. 1000%

4. Comprehension check

Choose the answer that best reflects the sense of the text.

- Increasing numbers of Japanese women are taking diet pills because I.*
a. they are too fat.
b. they want to become fashion models.
c. they want to become even thinner.
- The drug fenfluramine I.*
a. is designed to treat heart problems.
b. stops you feeling hungry.
c. is an ingredient in all herbal slimming aids.
- Cholesterol levels are low in Japan because of I.*
a. slimming aids.
b. medical treatment.
c. a healthy diet.

4 Japanese men have become more obese as a result of I.

- a. an increased consumption of western fast foods.
- b. an increased consumption of fish, seaweed and green tea.
- c. pressures from the media.

5 In Japan this summer, skin-tight jeans are:

- a. extremely popular.
- b. extremely unpopular.
- c. making people very angry.

6 There are relatively more cases of eating disorders amongst women in Japan than there are in Western countries because I.

- a. they take dietary pills.
- b. appearance is more important in Japanese culture.
- c. it is a global trend.

5. Vocabulary work

Match the words in the left hand column with the meanings in the right-hand column:

- | | |
|-----------------|---|
| 1. fatal | a. thin, healthy and attractive |
| 2. obsession | b. small and thin |
| 3. trim | c. to praise |
| 4. obesity | d. causing death |
| 5. svelte | e. very popular |
| 6. to extol | f. graceful, thin and attractive |
| 7. affluence | g. to remove |
| 8. petite | h. the condition of being severely overweight |
| 9. all the rage | i. wealth |
| 10. to withdraw | j. a constant strong interest in something |

Fill the gaps with words from the text or forms of words from the text:

- 1. If someone is thin and graceful, they can be described as _____ .
- 2. If something can kill you, it can be described as _____ .
- 3. If someone is very thin and unattractive, they can be described as _____ .
- 4. An _____ is a constant, strong, unhealthy interest in something.
- 5. Fenfluramine _____ the appetite.
- 6. The state of being excessively overweight is known as _____ .
- 7. A _____ woman is one who is thin, small and attractive.
- 8. _____ clothes are clothes that fit your body very tightly.

6. Discussion

In some societies, being slim is valued very highly. To what extent is the media responsible for this? Make a list of the advantages and disadvantages of slimming.