

Stacey Nye, PhD, FAED

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When Is Thin Too Thin?

By **ERIC WILSON**

THEY were alarmingly thin. Snejana Onopka, Natasha Poly and Hana Soukupova, models in demand among the fashion designers who showed their collections in New York last week, appeared so gaunt and thin that their knees and elbows were larger than their concave thighs and pipe cleaner arms, and their bobbling heads looked as if a slight breeze could detach them from their frail bodies.

Linda Wells, the editor of the beauty magazine Allure, said there were moments during the shows when she could hear gasps in the audience at their appearance.

“What becomes alarming is when you see bones and start counting ribs,” Ms. Wells said.

At a Vogue party on Monday for a young designer competition, the model Jessica Stam expressed similar dismay. “There are a lot of girls doing the shows who are very thin and frail,” she said. “I don’t know if they are healthy or not, but I don’t think the frail, fragile look is very feminine, and I don’t think it’s attractive.”

Yet there remains an ideal among designers who seem to prize an ever thinner frame to display their clothes. Some who attended the New York shows question whether acceptable boundaries have been crossed, as when fashion glamorized images of heroin abuse in the early 1990’s.

Despite perennial complaints that models are too thin, there is a new sense of concern that designers are contributing to unhealthy and potentially life-threatening behavior among models vying to appear in their shows.

“We are minutes away from a catastrophe,” said David Bonnouvrier, the chief executive of DNA Models, which represents many of the top faces in the business. In an interview, Mr. Bonnouvrier said designers and model bookers were encouraging extreme thinness, so much so that several of the models he represents, when asked about their weight, have refused to seek medical attention for what are probable eating disorders.

“This goes against everything we stand for as an industry,” Mr. Bonnouvrier said. “I am kicking and screaming about it now because this should be an industry of beauty and luxury, not famished-looking people that look pale and sick.”

Over the last decade fashion magazines have responded to such criticism by including a range of body types in their layouts, but when designers first show their collections at runway shows, they tend to use models who are little more than spectral wisps, expressionless hangers for their clothes.

Last week the organizers of Madrid fashion week, usually an overlooked event in comparison with the major shows in New York, London (this week), Milan and Paris, said they were banning models with a height-to-weight ratio below what the [World Health Organization](#) considered normal. In effect, models who weigh less than 125 pounds are prohibited from working the runways. Organizers of the event said they wanted to project “an image of beauty and health.”

Complaints about the idolization of role models who suggest unhealthy lifestyles are culturally endemic. Celebrities like Nicole Richie, Lindsay Lohan, Paris Hilton and Mischa Barton have all been subjects of tabloid headlines asking, “Are they too thin?” In all likelihood, the answer is yes, but that does not stop magazines from displaying their pictures or, likewise, designers from casting thin models in their shows.

“What’s happening right now is an extreme,” Ms. Wells said. “Some of the models really are too thin, but that is such a tricky thing to say.”

The news media squall about underweight models, which is engulfing the fashion events in Madrid and now in London, centers largely on whether fashion shows perpetuate an unhealthy image of beauty, encouraging eating disorders among young women.

The producers of these fashion events have largely dismissed the concerns. On Saturday a British cabinet member, Culture Secretary Tessa Jowell, called for London designers to follow the example of Madrid by banning underweight models. But the British Fashion Council, led by Stuart Rose, the chief executive of Marks & Spencer, said it would not interfere with the designers’ aesthetic. And some designers said it was misleading to equate thinness with being unhealthy and that the standard cited by the organizers in Madrid did not take into account age and puberty, which may cause a model who is unusually tall to appear frighteningly thin.

“We’re talking about this because Madrid chose to do something now,” said Katie Ford, the chief executive of Ford Models. “Do I think because you’re thin that you’re anorexic? No. The runway represents a very small segment of the entire fashion business. On the runway, model size has been frequently a representation of the designers’ image at that point of time.”

But that debate has overshadowed the likelihood that some of these models, who have thus far been limited to runway shows but who aspire to more lucrative magazine work, are suffering from real eating disorders.

“I feel that people are taking the wrong angle on this whole issue,” Mr. Bonnouvrier said. “These models look sick.”

Although it would seem reasonable that the agencies that represent the models have a responsibility to monitor their health, Mr. Bonnouvrier and other agents described an environment that is dictated by the designers. A model’s success depends on fitting an ideal image. He said that many of the models come from broken homes or poor countries, speak little English and are conforming to those demands as a means of survival. If he complains, he said, they will simply switch to another agency.

“I want to really emphasize the point that we have very little leverage over our clients should they have such problems when they continue to be confirmed by the most important designers, photographers and magazines in this industry,” Mr. Bonnouvrier said. “A young model suffering from eating disorders is an ancient topic. What is new, however, is the alarming number of young models that are suffering and yet still work.”

There has been some resistance among designers. Amanda Brooks, who assists Bryan Bradley of Tuleh with model castings, said a top runway model was turned down because she looked too thin. “You could see her hip bones,” Ms. Brooks said. “We couldn’t imagine putting her in a dress.”

Some designers dispute that they are solely to blame for models’ weight issues. “I think we’re all to blame,” said Michael Vollbracht, the designer of [Bill Blass](#). “I’m very aware of these girls who look too thin or unhealthy, and at one point during the casting I had to walk out of the room. We called a model’s agency and said, ‘Do you even watch these girls?’ ”

Milla Jovovich, the model and designer of a fashion collection called Jovovich-Hawk, said that dangerously thin models have been around since she was modeling as a child, as have the complaints, though little has ever been done in terms of prevention.

“There need to be more rules and regulations within the modeling industry,” Ms. Jovovich said. “A lot of problems that are very gray areas need to be put in black and white.”

*North Shore Center, LLC, 10303 N. Port Washington Rd., #203, Mequon, WI 53092,
262-241-5955, Ext 210 www.nodietdoc.com*