



# Fat and Healthy



by Lori Ann Selke

**T**oo often, being both fat and healthy is seen as impossible, contradictory. Being fat is, if not a disease, than at least a medical condition, and (lucky for us?) a treatable one. And besides, it's much more healthy to be thin, right?

Not in my not-so-humble opinion. Fat girls, especially self-accepting fat girls who take care of themselves in a positive fashion, can be just as healthy as everyone else; often healthier, even, especially when you consider the detrimental health effects of yo-yo dieting or what have you.

It is very difficult to find accurate, unbiased health information for fat women. Sometimes, it seems that every medical problem we have is linked to our weight, especially by fat-phobic doctors. We need accurate information about what we are and are not at risk for because of our weight, what alternatives to losing weight we have for treating certain conditions, how to exercise well and eat right without worrying about how much fat we are burning or how many calories we are consuming. Eventually, I hope to talk about many of these topics: nutrition and exercise, alternative treatments for health conditions commonly experienced by fat women which do not involve losing weight, and similar topics. (And I encourage people with specific questions to write this magazine.)

But first, I'm going to start off by discussing some health problems fat girls are less prone to than other women. We're told that we're unhealthy and at risk for so many things; but being fat also reduces your chances of suffering from certain conditions.

Foremost among these is osteoporosis. Osteoporosis is a condition in which, over time, bones lose mass and eventually become brittle and prone to fractures and collapse. Women are more prone to osteoporosis than men, and there has been a lot of press about how devastating osteoporosis can be, as well as the

fact that it is both incurable and preventable. But there are many other risk factors besides being female in regards to osteoporosis. Three of the most notable are being underweight, small-boned, and lacking a history of load-bearing exercise. It seems that fat women's bones become denser and stronger from a lifetime of carrying notable weight. Thus, even if fat women begin to suffer bone loss in their later years, their bones have farther to go before they deteriorate to the point that osteoporosis sets in. This doesn't mean you shouldn't maintain

carrying extra weight gives our bodies spare energy stores to access when our blood sugar drops; perhaps those stores also help in some way to regulate our blood sugar levels when we eat too much sugary food at once, by providing an alternate, steadier energy source. No one really knows for sure; but anecdotal evidence certainly seems to show a strong correlation between increased weight and decreased frequency and severity of low blood sugar symptoms.

A higher body weight also seems to correlate with less complications during

pregnancy, for all you fertile kid-contemplating dykes out there. There seems to be a reason women gain significant non-baby weight during pregnancy; the extra

weight again seems to be protective in some yet-undefined way. Certainly, it is linked with less risk of low birth weight, stillbirth, and premature birth among other things. Doctors used to try to restrict weight gain in pregnant women on the mistaken belief that it would prevent toxemia. Many pregnant women also diet in an attempt to limit how much weight they retain after their pregnancy ends, an idea that seems downright dangerous to me. Nowadays, many doctors set ideal minimum weight gains for pregnant women, a vast improvement. Eating well and nutritiously, without regard to weight at all, is the best plan for pregnancy.

And fat women are also less prone to malnutrition, which shouldn't come as too much of a surprise. It may come as a surprise that malnutrition isn't confined to Third World countries or poor urban neighborhoods; however, when you consider that the World Health Organization defines starvation as a calorie intake of less than 1000 a day, and that reducing diets in this country often restrict calorie intake to 700-1000 calories a day (and in some cases, even as low as 500), you can see that malnutrition can be very easy to experience, even if one is white and comfortably middle-



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a calcium-rich diet, of course, but it does mean that the next time your fat-phobic doctor suggests for some reason or other that you might want to lose some weight, you can look at him or her with wide eyes and say, "Oh no, I couldn't do that, you see, it might put me at risk for osteoporosis..."

Another condition that carrying more body weight seems to reduce is the effects of having low blood sugar. (However, hypoglycemia, medically-defined low blood sugar, is often considered a precursor of diabetes, which is supposed to be linked to being "overweight." Here I'm referring more to the symptoms accompanying non-medically diagnosable low blood sugar, which is why I'm not using the medical term.) Many women who suffer from low blood sugar notice that when they eat sugary foods on an empty stomach, they get a burst of energy, followed by spells of dizziness. (What's happening is that the body's blood sugar peaks, and then drops significantly, causing the dizzy spells.) Also, people with a tendency toward low blood sugar often begin to feel woozy and faint, or sometimes sleepy, when they've gone too long without eating, because their blood sugar levels have dropped too low. Perhaps



## Fat and Healthy, continued

class. Fat girls who eat right, however, aren't likely to short themselves on essential nutrients the way chronic dieters are more likely to.

Which brings us to the hazards of dieting that fat girls can avoid by being big and proud. Most notably, chronic dieters put a lot of strain on their hearts, probably from the repeated need to adjust to weight gains and losses. A stable weight, of whatever proportion, is much easier on the heart. Regular aerobic exercise is even better for one's cardiovascular health, and is certainly to be recommended over a weight-loss program if you're concerned about this.

There are some health conditions that seem to correlate with being fat, such as gallstones, diabetes, and joint problems. Later columns will hopefully address these. For now, keep in mind, and be sure to tell your doctor, that correlation does not equal causation; being fat does not necessarily contribute to these conditions, they are merely associated with each other. Also keep in mind that most health conditions supposedly associated with being fat are actually most likely linked with on-again off-again dieting. Almost all research done in this country relating fatness to health problems is actually done on chronic dieters.

It's my hope that the information in this column will help you be happy, content, outrageous and healthy dykes, prepared with energy and information to challenge stereotypes and ignorance about fat women and health. Spread the word. After reading this column, tell everyone how being the way you are actually keeps you healthier than you might be otherwise! And then explain, in excruciating, gloating detail...✱

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**FaT GiRL is thrilled to have *Fat and Healthy* as an ongoing feature. Send your health-related questions to: Fat Girl, 2215-R Market St. #193, San Francisco, CA 94114. We'd also love to have regular columns on other subjects. If there's something you'd like to write about, drop us a line!**

## The Lesbian Health Guide

a review (mostly) by M.G. Cimino and Sondra Solo

"Food is love!!!" Did you know that? I didn't either until I made the mistake of perusing the 'self help' guides at the local Barnes and Noble. A quick, unofficial study of the psychiatry and addiction/recovery section informed me that right after 'co-dependency,' love-starved fat people were the hot topic. One book blamed my mother, another my father, while one was simply entitled "Daily Affirmations for the Compulsive Overeater." Two of the selections came with self-help 'workbooks.' How will you achieve recovery with the help of these workbooks? Can we all say, "Weigh and measure your food"? So, be warned, the attack on fat people has again cloaked itself yet another disguise.

Because of this specter of dieting, which turns up far too often, it is with great trepidation that I approach any health guide or medical advice. Too often, any helpful messages I might receive are lost in the blare of "Lose weight!!"

Well, thank the Goddess for the *Lesbian Health Guide*, edited by Regan McClure and Anne Vespry. Published by the Queer Press in Canada, this book begins with "Body Image and Eating Disorders" as its first section. The section opens with a Fat Oppression Roundtable. Under the body issues section the problems are listed as: Anorexia, Bulimia, Weight Preoccupation/Yo-Yo Dieting, and Compulsive Eating. The chapter discusses each briefly, and then gives suggestions for the lesbian interested in improving her body image. For example, "Weight preoccupation includes anything from a desire to be thinner, to counting calories, or continually trying to lose weight." It is the first health guide I've seen mention that fat women are oppressed and receive poor medical care because so much attention is placed on their appearance. The section is excellent and contains one of the best discussions of body image, society's influence, and what you can do about it, that I've seen in a health book.

The book continues, discussing problems that affect all of us including stress, menstruation, child rearing, menopause, drug addiction, sexually transmitted diseases, lesbian abuse, and living in poverty. Unfortunately, most of the hospital/medical care advice is applicable to Canadians who work and live under a different health care system.

If anyone is interested in getting a copy ask your local bookstore. If need be, they can order you a copy from Bookpeople Wholesalers in Oakland. They can have it for you the next day. The price should be about \$15.

Whether you buy the *Lesbian Health Guide* or not, take 5 minutes to participate in some fat activism: Step 1) go to your local mondo-chain bookstore. 2) Proceed immediately to the 'Self-Help' section and fill your arms with an assortment of 'Food is Love' titles, which you can then helpfully disperse around the store, placing them carefully backwards, behind other books and in other convenient locations. 3) With all the extra room on the shelf, turn other titles, such as *Addiction to Dieting*, *Shadow on a Tightrope*, and *Fat Women Speak*, so that their covers face the consumer. 4) As you depart the store, pat yourself on the back for making the fat-phobic world a better place.✱

## Three Inches

syndee branton 1995

three inches and life will be better, new worlds will open up for the taking  
three inches and the fucking voice in the back of my mind might shut up  
three inches and I'll be sexy, attract lovers, a full-blown sexual threat  
three inches and I can dress for success, climb the corporate ladder,  
be everything I'm supposed to be  
three inches and I can swallow this lie again and believe it  
They call it dying by inches  
I do it all the time