# Fitness influencers’ steroid use fuels unrealistic body ideals and health risks



In the ever-evolving landscape of fitness culture, the meteoric rise of social media influencers has led to a striking phenomenon where the lines between aspiration and deception are increasingly blurred. A prime example is Brian “Liver King” Johnson, whose impressively sculpted physique and outlandish claims were viewed with scepticism by many even before his secrets were revealed. His promotion of a diet consisting of raw organ meats, while simultaneously maintaining a regimen of anabolic steroids—costing him nearly $11,000 a month—has exposed the façade behind many so-called fitness gurus. This not only points to the rampant use of performance-enhancing drugs in the industry but raises questions regarding the authenticity of the aspirational physiques that dominate platforms like Instagram.

The fitness influencer culture is not new; it has long been intertwined with the notion that extreme body transformations are achievable through sheer will and discipline. Yet, as James Smith, a personal trainer and influencer who has been candid about his own steroid use, asserts, "If you want to make a living from fitness, you’re almost stupid for trying to do it naturally." This sentiment echoes a broader reality facing aspiring trainers: the overwhelming temptation to employ shortcuts to achieve success. With the fitness industry being as lucrative as it is, marked by an explosion of online courses, coaching apps, and meal plans, the lure of performance enhancers becomes hard to resist.

The acceptance of steroids and other anabolic agents in the fitness community has reached alarming levels. It is estimated that over 50% of fitness influencers are involved in the use of performance-enhancing drugs, a statistic that underscores the pervasive nature of the issue. Moreover, an increase in needle exchange program usage among young men indicates a troubling rise in steroid use, as more individuals are perhaps motivated by the unattainable aesthetics showcased in their feeds. This growing trend also correlates with the rising body dysmorphia associated with constant exposure to idealised body images online. A survey revealed that a significant portion of the population—23% of men and 42% of women—reported rarely feeling body confident, which aligns with findings that suggest active users of social media experience heightened dissatisfaction with their own appearances.

Social media platforms, particularly TikTok, have further facilitated this cycle of misinformation. A study by the Center for Countering Digital Hate reported that videos promoting steroid-like substances garnered over 587 million views within three years, predominantly from individuals aged 18 to 24. This not only highlights the platform's role in normalising the use of such substances but also raises concerns about influencers' responsibilities to their impressionable audiences. Influencers promoting selective androgen receptor modulators (SARMs) and similar substances often do so without disclosing potential health risks, exacerbating the issue of body dysmorphia among young adults.

The consequences of these misleading narratives extend beyond damaged self-esteem; they also encompass significant health risks. Users of performance enhancers often report adverse effects, including depression, severe muscle cramps, and long-term fertility issues, yet many influencers continue to portray an image of physical perfection without acknowledging the truths behind their transformations. High-profile figures like Janelle Rohner, a Peloton instructor who faced backlash for admitting to using GLP-1 drugs, serve as rare examples of accountability. However, her honesty seems more like an exception than a new norm in the industry.

While some influencers choose to feign authenticity and promote an unattainable ideal, others are beginning to challenge this trend. Communities on platforms like Reddit engage in busy discussions dissecting whether various physiques are achievable naturally, focusing on tell-tale physical signs often associated with enhanced use. Influencers and coaches on YouTube also provide insight into the realities of steroid use, helping to educate viewers on the potential dangers surrounding both substance abuse and unrealistic expectations in fitness.

Moving forward, a potential remedy to this pervasive issue lies in transparency. As Smith notes, the discourse surrounding the risks associated with steroids and the implications of their use must be addressed among high-profile figures. Encouraging a change in focus from purely aesthetic goals to promoting overall health and well-being may offer a healthier perspective to followers. As Dan Roberts, a personal trainer, aptly states, "the good information is out there—we just have to look for it through all the noise and nonsense."

In an industry where many influencers have misled audiences in the pursuit of likes and follows, it remains crucial to foster an environment where authenticity and health take precedence over idealised physiques. As the cautionary tale of the Liver King exemplifies, sometimes the embrace of hard truths invites a more sustainable and rewarding path to fitness than chasing an impossible silhouette.

### Reference Map

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2025/may/15/fake-fitness-influencers-the-secrets-and-lies-behind-the-worlds-most-enviable-physiques> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2025/may/15/fake-fitness-influencers-the-secrets-and-lies-behind-the-worlds-most-enviable-physiques> - This article examines the prevalence of performance-enhancing drug use among fitness influencers, highlighting cases like Brian 'Liver King' Johnson, who was exposed for spending over $11,000 monthly on anabolic steroids. It discusses the normalization of such practices in the fitness industry and the impact on public perceptions of achievable physiques.
3. <https://www.businessinsider.com/fitness-influencers-steroids-secret-dangerous-body-dysmorphia> - This report reveals that a significant number of fitness influencers use performance-enhancing drugs (PEDs), with estimates suggesting that over 50% of them engage in such practices. The article highlights the health risks associated with PED use and the potential for body dysmorphia among followers who aspire to similar physiques.
4. <https://www.ctinsider.com/news/article/tiktok-videos-promoting-steroid-use-have-millions-18399338.php> - A study by the Center for Countering Digital Hate found that TikTok videos promoting steroid-like substances have amassed over 587 million views in the U.S. over three years, with 72% of viewers aged 18 to 24. The report underscores the role of social media in marketing performance-enhancing drugs to young adults.
5. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-08-14/steroids-rise-in-young-men-as-fitpack-needle-exchange-doubles/102681198> - An increase in demand for larger needles at needle exchange programs in Australia indicates a rise in steroid use among young men. The article discusses the health implications and the role of social media influencers in promoting such substances.
6. <https://www.businessinsider.com/tiktok-influencers-promoting-sarms-ped-steriod-like-substances-teens-2023-11> - This article highlights how TikTok influencers are promoting selective androgen receptor modulators (SARMs) and other performance-enhancing substances to teenagers and young adults. It discusses the health risks associated with these substances and the responsibility of influencers in promoting safe practices.
7. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/article/2024/jun/06/how-steroids-got-big-bodybuilding-influencers> - This piece explores the widespread use of steroids among bodybuilding influencers, citing studies that estimate up to 4% of men have used steroids at some point in their lives. It examines the cultural and social factors contributing to the normalization of steroid use in the fitness industry.