

# Some whites struggle more with obesity related to discrimination than blacks, Hispanics

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(PhysOrg.com) -- A new study confirms that discrimination is a stress factor that is related to obesity, but surprisingly, this is most true among ethnic white groups and not blacks or Hispanics.

"We wanted to determine whether feeling discriminated against was linked with having excess tummy fat in adults," says Haslyn Hunte, an assistant professor of health and kinesiology at Purdue University who led this study as a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Health and Society Scholar. "We did find such a link – but not where we expected. Feelings of discrimination were associated with excess stomach fat among ethnic whites – Italians, Jews, Irish and Polish Americans in Chicago – but not among other whites, blacks or Hispanics.

"White ethnic groups that include those of Polish, Italian, Jews and Irish descent have been historically discriminated against in the United States. Some will argue that we as a society have moved on from discriminating against others because of their race or ethnicity, but this data and other recent research suggests a different story."

Hunte and David R. Williams at Harvard University analyzed personal information collected between 2001 and 2003 on more than 3,100 adults living in Chicago. The researchers assessed perceived discrimination based on if individuals believed they were treated with less courtesy, received poorer service, thought others acted as if they were not smart or

if they felt threatened or harassed. These survey responses were correlated with measures of abdominal obesity. The American Journal of Public Health study, which was funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, was published online this month and will appear in the journal's December issues.

The analysis found that ethnic whites who said they'd experienced discrimination were two to six times more likely to be obese than ethnic whites who'd experienced no discrimination, Hunte says.

"There are a couple of possible reasons why there is a link between discrimination and obesity in ethnic whites but not among blacks or Hispanics," he says.

First, blacks and Hispanics may have developed mechanisms for coping with stress that ethnic whites have not developed. Second, blacks and Hispanics may be more likely to accept larger body types. Third, discrimination may simply be more pervasive and insidious than is widely believed.

"We talk a lot about stress contributing to obesity," Hunte says.

"Discrimination is another form of stress, and as we've heard many times before, such stressful experiences may actually make us sick. The feeling that we're not being given a fair shot on a day-to-day basis gets under our skin in a variety of ways, including our health. For example, scientists believe that excess fat in the stomach area is a risk factor for cardiovascular disease, so discrimination can literally harm the human body."

The researchers will be looking at similar long-term data, as well as national data.

Provided by Purdue University

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