Worries about paying bills can cause people to pack on pounds

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Stressing out can cause people to gain weight, according to a study appearing in the July 15 issue of the *American Journal of Epidemiology*. This new study is believed to be one of the first of its kind to look at the relationship between weight gain and multiple types of stress—job-related demands, difficulty paying bills, strained family relationships, depression or anxiety disorder—in the U.S. population.

"Today's economy is stressing people out, and stress has been linked to a number of illnesses —such as heart disease, high blood pressure and increased risk for cancer. This study shows that stress is also linked to weight gain," according to Jason Block, M.D., M.P.H., who conducted the research as a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Health & Society Scholar® at Harvard University. Block practices internal medicine at Brigham & Women's Hospital and is on the faculty of the Harvard Medical School/Harvard Pilgrim Health Care.

Women's waistlines are affected by more types of stress, according to the study, "Psychosocial Stress and Change in Weight Among U.S. Adults." In addition to weight gain associated with financial problems or a difficult job, women also added pounds when grappling with strained family relationships and feeling limited by life's circumstances.

For men, the numbers on the scale did not go up when facing difficult family relationships or feeling constrained by life circumstances. Among men, lack of decision authority at work and lack of skill discretion was associated with greater weight gain. Skill discretion can be defined as the

ability to learn new skills on the job and to perform interesting job duties.

Overall, this study found that people who reported increased psychological stress gained more weight if they already had higher body mass indexes (BMI). A similar weight-gain pattern was not found among lower-weight people who were dealing with the same types of stress, according to the study.

When coping with life's stressful periods, individuals may change their eating behaviors, which can lead to changes in weight. Stress-induced weight gain is influenced by a person's gender, what types of foods people eat when they change their eating behaviors, and whether the person is already overweight or obese. These factors may cause some people to gain more weight under stressful circumstances, while others may gain less weight or even lose weight when stressed.

Stress reduction may be an important part of weight-loss programs in the workplace and in clinical and public health programs, the study recommended. In the workplace, access to weight-loss programs, flexible work schedules and exercise programs can help stressed-out workers.

"This is one of the first studies to explore the relationship between stress and weight gain in a U.S. population," Block said. "Our findings show that stress should be recognized as a threat to the well-being of American adults, especially those who are already overweight."

For the study, a nationally representative group of 1,355 men and women was followed for more than nine years. The research was supported by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and the National Institute on Aging.

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