

# Weight Loss Among Widows More Harmful to Health Than Post-Wedding Weight Gain, Research Shows

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(PhysOrg.com) -- The death of a spouse has a much more profound effect on weight change than marital status, according to new research by sociologists at The University of Texas at Austin.

The researchers have detailed their study "Marital Status, Marital Transitions and Body Weight" in the June issue of the [Journal of Health and Social Behavior](#). The lead researcher, Debra Umberson, professor of sociology, will be a presenter at the American Sociological Association Annual Meeting in San Francisco, Aug. 8-9.

Umberson and her team of researchers, Daniel Powers, associate professor of sociology at the university; and Hui Liu, assistant professor of sociology at Michigan State University, analyzed data from a national survey, in which they tracked weight trajectories among 1,500 adults over a 15-year period. They found that while the transition into marriage is associated with temporary weight gain, weight loss affected by divorce or widowhood is the most detrimental.

According to the study, the biggest cause for concern is the long-term weight loss following widowhood, especially among African Americans. Those who lose as little as 10 pounds are at an increased risk for mortality.

"This is a big concern for population health as significant weight loss

increases mortality risk—especially among the elderly," Umberson said. "We were especially concerned to see that weight loss following widowhood is significantly greater for African Americans than for whites."

Umberson suggests that weight loss following widowhood reflects grief-related stress, as well as significant lifestyle changes. Because married people routinely divide cooking and grocery shopping chores, a partner helps to prepare food and provides more social motivation for eating meals. And when widowed men and women fall out of that routine, they tend to lose interest in eating.

"Given that even modest [weight loss](#) increases mortality risks, the newly widowed need to be aware they are at risk when they begin to lose weight," Umberson said. "But this is a lot to ask of bereaved persons, so most of my advice is for family members and helping professionals who can make sure widowed men and women have access to food and provide opportunities for them to sit down and eat their meals with others."

Provided by University of Texas at Austin ([news](#) : [web](#))

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