

Chubby hubby is common, but ethnicity matters

December 1 2009, By Susan Lang

(PhysOrg.com) -- A new study helps untangle how marriage, gender and ethnicity are related to body weight. The study of almost 8,000 men and women will be published in the journal *Obesity*.

Although many studies have reported that married people, especially men, tend to be heavier than their unmarried counterparts, other research has drawn different conclusions. A new Cornell study helps untangle how gender and ethnicity play roles in the marriage-weight puzzle.

In a study of almost 8,000 men and women in the United States, the researchers found that, indeed, married men in general were much more likely to be [overweight](#) than other men, even when controlling for diet, [physical activity](#) and smoking behaviors. Among women, however, there was no overall relationship between [marital status](#) and [body weight](#), said lead author Jeffery Sobal, a Cornell nutritional sociologist who studies the relationships of obesity with dating, marriage and [marital satisfaction](#)

However, ethnicity makes a difference for both men and women, according to Sobal's study, which was published online earlier this year and will be published in the December issue of the journal *Obesity* (17:12). Divorced white men, never-married [black men](#) and all Hispanic men (except widowers) were less likely to be overweight than their ethnically similar married counterparts, even after controlling for other [demographic characteristics](#), report Sobal and his co-authors.

"The striking difference between never-married and married black and Hispanic men was significantly different than the pattern observed among whites, where the never-married and married were equally likely to be overweight," said Sobal.

Ethnic patterns among women paint a different picture: The body weights of white women tended not to vary by marital status. While more black women were overweight than white women, separated black women were more than twice as likely to be overweight as married black women. Never-married [Hispanic women](#) were significantly less likely to be overweight than their married counterparts.

"These results show the relevance of considering the complexity of interacting relationships between gender, ethnicity, marriage and body weight," said Sobal. Ethnic cultural differences may be involved at many levels, he said. For example, white women and never-married men may be more concerned with conforming to cultural norms of thinness than others.

On the other hand, other researchers suggest that "black women tend to have more accepting body images and are not as invested in thinness as [white women](#)," said Sobal, who conducted the study with research associate Karla Hanson and Edward Frongillo, an adjunct professor of nutritional sciences at Cornell and chair of the Department of Health Promotion, Education and Behavior at the Arnold School of Public Health, University of South Carolina-Columbia.

The findings are important, said Sobal, to understanding how social characteristics can help identify people at risk of being overweight so that efforts can be targeted to assist them in weight management.

The study was based on an analysis of 3,947 [women](#) and 4,019 men in the 1999--2002 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey. The

researchers looked at measured height and weight data (rather than self-reported), gender and relationship status (which included cohabitation, separation, divorce and widowhood) and controlled for such factors as food intake, exercise and smoking.

Provided by Cornell University ([news](#) : [web](#))

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