

Skin color matters when it comes to Canadians' health: study

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A new University of British Columbia study finds that Black Canadians with darker skin are more likely to report poorer health than Black Canadians with lighter skin. The study also suggests that a mismatched racial identity can negatively affect health.

The study, published online in the current issue of [Social Science & Medicine](#) journal, provides the first Canadian evidence of the health effects of "colourism," discrimination targeted more strongly at darker-skinned than lighter-skinned people of colour, says the author.

Researchers surveyed the self-reported racial identities -- Asian, [Black](#), South Asian and White -- of nearly 1,500 participants from Vancouver and Toronto across four key health indicators: high blood pressure, depression, [mental health](#) and overall health.

While some findings support existing research -- that Black Canadians are more likely than others to report high blood pressure and that Asian Canadians are most likely to report poorer mental health -- the study found that Black Canadians with darker skin were as much as four times more likely than Black Canadians with lighter skin to report poor overall health.

Although U.S. scholars have researched the wide-ranging effects of colourism for African Americans, including effects on health, the UBC study's author Prof. Gerry Veenstra, Dept. of Sociology, says this is the first study to suggest that colourism can affect the health of Canadians as

well.

"The findings indicate that, for Black Canadians, levels of discrimination can depend on the relative darkness or lightness of their skin," says Veenstra. "For health researchers and policymakers, this means that the broad racial classifications typically used by health researchers may actually underestimate the magnitude of racial health inequalities in this country."

"This is a first step to understanding colourism's manifestations in Canada and the degree to which and for whom it affects health and well-being," adds Veenstra, who plans to study whether colourism affects other Canadian racial identities.

The study also finds that mistaking an individual's [racial identity](#) can have significant negative physical or mental impacts. Participants who reported higher levels of racial identity mismatches were found to be at greater risk of high blood pressure, poorer self-rated mental health and poorer self-rated overall health.

"For instance, people who considered themselves to be White but believed others tend to think they are something else -- perhaps that they were of mixed race, for example -- were at a higher risk of high [blood pressure](#) and poor mental health," Veenstra says.

While the study did not investigate the causes of this phenomenon, Veenstra says previous studies have suggested that people experience stress when the cues provided by others do not match their conceptions of themselves, a stress that can be strong enough to elicit adverse health outcomes.

Provided by University of British Columbia

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