

Britain's obese in denial about their weight

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Credit: Peter Häger/Public Domain

A majority of obese people in Britain would not describe themselves as "obese", and many would not even describe themselves as "very overweight", according to a Cancer Research UK study published in *BMJ Open* today.

In one of the first studies of its kind to examine British perceptions of

obesity, fewer than 10 per cent of those who are clinically obese accept they have a serious weight problem.

In a 2012 survey** of around 2000 adults, only 11 per cent of [obese women](#) accurately acknowledged they were "obese", with most describing themselves as "very overweight" or "just right".

And among men, only seven per cent correctly described themselves as being "obese" and another 16 per cent as "very overweight".

Approximately 10 per cent of people in the survey knew the BMI*** threshold for obesity and those who did were more likely to define themselves as "obese".

Researchers suggest that as bigger sizes become the new "normal", people are less likely to recognise the health problems associated with their weight.

Professor Jane Wardle, co-author and director of the Cancer Research UK Health Behaviour Centre at UCL, said: "It's a real worry that people don't recognise that their weight places them in the obese category, because it means they aren't aware they are at increased risk of a number of [health problems](#) including cancer.

"This is despite increased media coverage of obesity, and [public health campaigns](#) aimed at improving public awareness.

"The term 'obese' is often considered derogatory, which may be why so many people reject it. Mass media often illustrate [obesity](#) in a way that people find offensive, with pictures of bulging beer bellies and huge behinds, so people shy away from these images.

"But we also asked people whether they felt they were "very overweight"

and the majority of those who were obese did not accept this term either. This is a real problem, as it means they are unlikely to identify with health messages on the subject of weight.

"We need to establish better ways for health professionals to address this sensitive subject and communicate with people whose health would benefit from positive lifestyle changes."

Around 18,000 cases of cancer in the UK each year are linked to being overweight or obese. Excess weight is known to increase the risk of several types of cancer including cancers of the breast in post-menopausal women, bowel, womb, oesophagus, pancreas, kidney and gallbladder.

Dr Julie Sharp, Cancer Research UK's head of health information, said: "This study provides an interesting insight into how people who are overweight view themselves. Carrying those extra pounds can have serious health implications. Fat cells are active, releasing hormones and other chemicals that affect many parts of the body, and increase the risk of cancer.

"Maintaining a healthy body weight is one of the most important ways of reducing the risk of [cancer](#), for both men and women. It's so important that [health](#) messaging and awareness campaigns are as effective as possible in supporting people of all shapes and sizes to make healthy choices."

More information: * Do weight perceptions among obese adults in Great Britain match clinical definitions? Analysis of cross-sectional surveys from 2007 and 2012. Johnson et al. *BMJ Open*.

** A previous survey conducted in 2007 found that 50 per cent of obese women considered themselves "very overweight" - a figure that dropped

to just 34 per cent in the 2012 survey. In 2007 13 per cent used the word "obese" compared with 11 per cent in 2012. Among obese men just four per cent considered themselves obese in 2007 rising by only a small amount to seven per cent in 2012.

*** Participants self-reported their height and weight. BMI was calculated using weight in kg/height in m². A BMI of 25 to 29.9 is considered overweight, 30 to 39.9 is the range for obesity, and anything over 40 is considered severely obese.

Provided by Cancer Research UK

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