

# Heightened weighing discomfort among women may increase their health risks

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A new study from the University of Pennsylvania points to increased health risks for women owing to their higher level of discomfort about being weighed in public.

The study showed that college-age females, more than their male counterparts, experience high degrees of discomfort at the prospect of being weighed in the presence of others.

The study's authors believe that some women may avoid necessary tests and treatments when a doctor visit includes a step on a public scale.

"Weighing concern may make these women, particularly those who are overweight and already at risk for certain ailments, less likely to visit a doctor," said Andrew B. Geier, lead author and a doctoral candidate in the Department of Psychology in the Penn School of Arts and Sciences. "Hopefully, this data will show the great advantage that can be had with just a small, inexpensive change in clinic policy: weighing patients in private."

The study also revealed that observers generally overestimate women's weight while women tend to believe that people are underestimating their weight due to slimming clothes or cosmetics. This means that, while women in the study demonstrated they do not want people to know their weight, their true weight was lower than others' estimates and a public weighing would correct the misperception.

Due to the increasing cost of health care, medical clinics, especially those serving poorer communities, constantly look for ways to cut costs. One common practice is to designate public space in the clinic-, often a well-trafficked hallway, to be suitable for weighings. Routine clinic practice has reduced the number of scales as well. In light of this new research, it is possible, in fact the authors believe likely, that women may skip free, potentially

life-saving tests, such as mammograms, rather than face the embarrassment of public weighing.

The study tested a series of hypotheses designed to explain why women reported a much larger degree of discomfort than men did.

In multiple questionnaires, females showed no more sensitivity to general embarrassment than did males, nor more sensitivity to public displays of other personal information. Neither did the discomfort come from the physical act of being weighed. These other possibilities were tested to ensure that the authors' original hypothesis was correct, that the public revealing of weight makes women so uncomfortable.

In addition, the study concludes that a partial source of female discomfort comes from the participants' own sense that they are overweight.

Study participants rated discomfort levels over a variety of weight-related scenarios. The more dissatisfied a female was with her weight, the greater the discomfort she experienced when being weighed. But even the very concept of weight, tested by assigning some participants to wear a badge bearing the single word, "Weight," caused elevated levels of discomfort because it drew unwanted attention to what is considered an unflattering personal attribute for women.

"The real danger here is the heavier a person is, the more discomfort they feel and thus the more likely they may find reasons to skip appointments," Geier said. "These may be the very people that need access to these clinics the most. If a person knows that he or she is going to be provided privacy during the weighing process, that could be a major relief, thereby tipping the scales to get them to go and get these potentially life-saving tests."

The study, to be published in the upcoming issue of

the journal *Appetite*, included 292 females and 190 males. The research was performed by Geier and Paul Rozin of the Penn Department of Psychology, which supported the study.

Source: University of Pennsylvania

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