

Many Americans blame themselves for weight stigma

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A new study by the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at UConn shows that many individuals who are targets of weight bias blame themselves for the stigma they experience. Credit: Shutterstock Photo

A new study by the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at the University of Connecticut shows that many individuals who are targets of weight bias also internalize the stigma directed towards them, blaming themselves for the stigma and unfair treatment they experience because of their weight.

It is well known that negative stereotypes and biases against people with obesity are widespread and this [weight stigma](#) can be harmful for physical and emotional health. Internalized weight [bias](#) has also been linked to concerning health consequences, but little is known about the prevalence of this self-directed stigma – until now.

The study, published today in the journal *Obesity*, found that internalized weight bias is prevalent among U.S. women and men, with high levels of internalized weight stigma in approximately 1 in 5 [adults](#) in the [general population](#) and as many as 52 percent of adults with obesity.

"Our findings indicate that internalized weight bias is common in the general population, and present among individuals across a range of body weights. Adults with high levels of weight bias internalization are more likely to be white, have a higher body-mass index, lower education and income, and be actively trying to lose weight," says Rebecca Puhl, deputy director of the UConn Rudd Center, professor of human development and family studies at UConn, and the study's lead author.

"In addition, people with high levels of internalization had experienced considerable weight stigma in their lives, especially being teased or treated unfairly by others because of their weight," Puhl says.

The study involves a comprehensive analysis and comparison of internalized weight bias across three groups of American adults: 2,529 adults from a diverse national survey panel; 515 adults from a national online data collection service; and 456 members of the Obesity Action Coalition who have struggled with their weight.

The 3,504 participants completed online surveys between July 2015 and October 2016. In all three samples, participants answered questions about their demographic characteristics, weight status and dieting behavior, and history of experiencing weight stigma. They also answered questions about internalizing weight bias – the extent to which they blame themselves for stigma, apply negative weight-based stereotypes to themselves, and negatively judge themselves due to their body weight.

The key findings of the study include:

- At least 44 percent of adults across all three samples reported average levels of weight bias internalization.
- Among adults with the highest levels of weight bias internalization, 72 percent were

women, supporting other studies showing an increased vulnerability among women compared to men.

- 84 percent of adults with a high level of weight bias internalization reported a history of experiencing weight stigma.
- Blacks and Latinos had lower levels of weight bias internalization compared to Whites.
- Among adults with a high level of weight bias internalization, 86 percent were currently trying to lose weight, 78 percent reported being teased, and 58 percent reported being treated unfairly because of their weight.
- In contrast, much smaller percentages of people with low internalization were currently trying to lose weight (21 percent), or reported being teased (17 percent) or treated unfairly (7 percent) because of their weight.

"This study provides an initial foundation to better understand the characteristics of individuals likely to internalize weight bias," Puhl says. "With so many people vulnerable to self-stigma, there is a clear need to implement strategies to support individuals who not only experience weight stigma but also internalize these negative experiences."

More information: Rebecca M. Puhl et al. Internalizing Weight Stigma: Prevalence and Sociodemographic Considerations in US Adults, *Obesity* (2017). [DOI: 10.1002/oby.22029](https://doi.org/10.1002/oby.22029)

Provided by University of Connecticut

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