

Weight bias and stigma

For many individuals, weight stigma has an ongoing impact on their life and is an important social determinant of health.⁽¹³⁾ Weight stigma may not always be obvious, but the evidence of its negative impacts on health and wellbeing is clear.

What weight stigma looks like:

- Weight stigma is pervasive and global, occurring across multiple areas of society e.g. workplaces, schools, healthcare, families and media.^(6, 15)
- Research suggests that weight stigma is an almost daily experience for people of a higher body weight.⁽¹⁶⁾ The prevalence of weight bias is higher among women, younger adults and those with higher BMI.^(5, 17)
- Weight stigma can be obvious e.g. negative attitudes, judgemental comments, public ridicule; or subtle e.g. body language, negative stereotypes, lack of employment opportunities, and physical barriers such as chair size.^(1, 16)
- People who are overweight or have obesity are often pre-judged to be lazy, weak-willed, lacking intelligence, unsuccessful and non-compliant with health advice.^(4, 18)
- Weight-based bullying is the most common form of harassment experienced and reported by children and adolescents.⁽¹⁹⁾ Those with larger body sizes are also more likely to experience victimisation and social isolation.^(5, 19)

People of a higher body weight:

- More frequently report being treated with less respect or courtesy in public and receiving poorer treatment in healthcare settings.^(17, 20)
- Are at least 3 times more likely to remain obese if they experience weight stigma.⁽²⁰⁾

“I get very frustrated because you do telephone interviews and you come across very well and then when they see you they are full of discrimination...You face more discrimination by being overweight.”⁽³⁾

Weight bias

- Defined as negative attitudes towards, and beliefs about others because of their weight.⁽¹⁴⁾
- Internalised weight bias is defined as holding negative beliefs about oneself due to weight or size.⁽¹⁴⁾
- Can lead to weight stigma.

Weight stigma

- Defined as “the social rejection and devaluation that accrues to those who do not comply with prevailing social norms of adequate body weight and shape.”⁽²⁶⁾
- Involves discriminatory actions against people with obesity that can lead to exclusion or inequities.⁽¹⁴⁾



Impacts of weight stigma

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Your mates pick on them and you join in, but you don't want to inside.⁽³⁶⁾

Negative behaviour changes

Stigma experience has been linked with exercise-avoidance and binge eating behaviours, contributing to poor metabolic health and further weight gain.^(5,7,22) Contrary to popular belief, messages which imply personal blame for excess weight do not motivate people to make healthy behaviour changes or seek support.^(1,7)

Greater psychological distress

Independent of BMI, weight-based discrimination has been associated with depressive symptoms, higher levels of anxiety, loneliness and frustration, lower self-esteem, body dissatisfaction and increased suicidal ideation.^(2,3,23-25)

Increased risk of mental ill-health

People who have experienced weight discrimination are 2.5 times more likely to experience a mood or anxiety disorder, independent of standard mental illness risk factors and BMI.^(13,21,26)

Youth health

Children and adolescents who experience weight-based bullying are more vulnerable to psychological distress e.g. depression, substance abuse, disordered eating, exercise-avoidance, low self-esteem, poor academic performance and social isolation.^(19,20) Experiencing weight stigma in adolescence has been shown to predict a higher BMI and obesity in adulthood.⁽¹⁹⁾

Increased physiological stress

Experiencing weight discrimination is linked with higher levels of inflammatory markers associated with chronic stress.^(27,28)

Internalised stigma

Weight stigma is often internalised, that is, people believe the negative stereotypes to be true about them, contributing to worse mental and physical health over time.^(2,13)

Residual stigma

The impact of stigma can be enduring, that is, it is still experienced in people who were formerly overweight, contributing to worse mental and physical health over time.^(19,29)

Increased obesity risk

Weight discrimination is associated with an increased risk of weight gain over time. People without obesity who experienced weight discrimination were 2.5 times more likely to become obese four years later than those who did not report weight discrimination.^(20,26)

Increased mortality risk

People who reported experiencing weight discrimination had a 60 per cent increased risk of dying, independent of BMI. This reported association was as strong as other established risk factors, such as smoking history and disease burden, likely related to the negative physical and mental health impacts of weight stigma.⁽²⁸⁾