

Study finds experiences of racism associated with weight gain in African American women

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A recent analysis conducted by investigators from the Slone Epidemiology Center at Boston University has found that frequent experiences of racism were associated with a higher risk of obesity among African American women. The findings, which currently appear online in the *American Journal of Epidemiology*, found the relationship between racism and obesity was strongest among women who reported consistently high experiences of racism over a 12-year period. The research was based on data from the Black Women's Health Study, a longitudinal study that enrolled 59,000 African-American women in 1995 and has followed them continually.

Rates of [obesity](#) in the United States have increased rapidly over the past few decades with the greatest increases reported for African American women. Approximately half of African American women are currently classified as obese. Obesity is a risk factor for numerous health conditions including cardiovascular diseases, type 2 diabetes, orthopedic problems, and death. Racism is a form of psychosocial stress that African Americans experience disproportionately. Experiences of [racism](#) could contribute to obesity because both animal and human data indicate that chronic exposure to stress can result in dysregulation of important neuroendocrine functions which can in turn influence the accumulation of excess body fat.

The Black Women's Health Study collected information on lifestyle factors, experiences of racism, height and weight and other factors using biennial questionnaires. The participants were asked in 1997 and in 2009

to rate the frequency of "everyday" experiences of racism, such as receiving poorer service in restaurants and stores, and if they had been treated unfairly because of their race on the job, in housing or by the police ("lifetime" racism). The analyses were restricted to women under the age 40 at the beginning of follow-up because most adult weight gain occurs during the reproductive years. The investigators found that women in the highest category of reported everyday racism in both 1997 and 2009 were 69 percent more likely to become obese compared to those in the lowest category at both intervals. Women who reported more lifetime racism were also at increased risk of obesity.

"Experiences of racism may explain in part the high prevalence of obesity among African American women," explained Yvette C. Cozier, DSc, MPH, assistant professor of epidemiology at Boston University who led the analyses. She suggests that work-place- and community-based programs to combat racism and interventions to reduce racism-induced stress could be an important component of strategies for prevention of obesity, especially in communities at high risk.

Provided by Boston University Medical Center

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