Older adults who perceive being discriminated against because of their weight, age, a physical disability or other aspect of appearance suffer significant physical and emotional health consequences compared with those who did not report experiencing such discrimination.

That's according to College of Medicine research involving more than 6,000 adults age 50 and older and covering changes in health over a four-year period.

“Our previous research showed that perceived discrimination based on body weight was associated with risk of obesity. We wanted to see whether this association extended to other health indicators and types of discrimination,” said lead author Angelina Sutin, assistant professor of behavioral sciences and social medicine. “What we found was unexpected and striking.”

The findings are part of a study published in the *American Journal of Psychiatry.*

In contrast, perceived discrimination based on relatively fixed characteristics – race, sex, ancestry and sexual orientation – were largely unrelated to declines in physical and emotional health for the older adults, Sutin said.

“We know how harmful discrimination based on race and sex can be, so we were surprised that perceived discrimination based on more malleable characteristics like age and weight had a more pervasive effect on health than discrimination based on these more fixed characteristics,” Sutin said.

One possible explanation, she said, is that adults who perceive being discriminated against for characteristics such as race and sex have developed a lifetime of coping mechanisms. By contrast, being treated differently due to changes in appearance related to aging is a relatively new phenomenon for many. 

Connie Tenorio, a McKnight Fellow, joins the College of Medicine’s Biomedical Sciences doctoral program in August.