Weight discrimination may put people at risk of dying early

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People who face weight discrimination have a greater risk of dying early - not because they may be overweight, but because of the effects of the discrimination, a new study has claimed.

Researchers from Florida State University College of Medicine in US examined data involving more than 18,000 people from two longitudinal studies, comparing those who reported experiencing weight discrimination with those who did not.

Accounting for other factors that might explain a greater risk for mortality, the researchers found that individuals reporting weight discrimination had a 60 per cent greater chance of dying over the follow-up period.

"What we found is that this isn't a case of people with a higher body-mass index (BMI) being at an increased risk of mortality - and they happen to also report being subjected to weight discrimination," said Angelina R Sutin, assistant professor at the College of Medicine.

"Independent of what their BMI actually is, weight discrimination is associated with increased risk of mortality," said Sutin.

Data came from two long-term and ongoing studies. The Health and Retirement Study (HRS), which began in 1992, involved more than 13,000 men and women with an average age of 68 for the time period the researchers examined.

Midlife in the US (MIDUS) is a study that began in 1995. The researchers examined MIDUS data involving about 5,000 men and women with an average age of 48.

In both samples, the researchers accounted for BMI, subjective health, disease burden, depressive symptoms, smoking history, and physical activity as indicators of mortality risk, but the association with weight discrimination remained.

"To our knowledge, this is the first time that this has been shown - that weight discrimination is associated with an increased risk of mortality," said Antonio Terracciano, associate professor in the College of Medicine's Department of Geriatrics.

Weight discrimination is not always meant to be mean-spirited, but a body of evidence demonstrates that it has harmful effects nonetheless, researchers said.

Previous studies indicate that teasing a person to lose weight has the opposite effect over the long-term.
People who are stigmatised because of their weight are more likely to engage in the kind of behaviour that contributes to obesity, including unhealthy eating and avoiding physical activity, researchers said.

"Some people think, 'Oh, well, you're just hurting somebody's feelings when you say something bad about their weight, but it will motivate them to lose weight, which will save their life," Sutin said.

Sutin points out that contrary to such beliefs, in addition to the psychological effects, weightism increases the risk of weight gain and premature mortality.

The study was published in the journal Psychological Science.