



## BLACK WOMEN AT MAJOR RISK FOR OBESITY-RELATED DISEASES



Martin Wittenberg, an associate professor at the Department of Economics at the University of Cape Town.

Health care planners in South Africa will have to ‘think hard and fairly quickly’ about what levers they can use to shift widespread perceptions among obese black women that they are underweight.

With powerful anecdotal evidence that obesity is becoming even more prized because it signals HIV negativity plus wealth, influence and power, this false belief had ‘all sorts of troubling implications’ for a rapid increase in weight-related diseases.

The warning was sounded by Martin Wittenberg, an associate professor at the Department of Economics at the University of Cape Town, whose research shows that an increase in weight has different implications for different population groups.

Startling cultural differences emerged in a subjective self-assessment questionnaire put out in a nationwide demographic and health survey.

While virtually no white women thought of themselves as underweight (more than half actually saw themselves as overweight), an alarming 15% of obese black female respondents thought of themselves as underweight.

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Wittenberg described this as ‘startling with huge health implications’ because these black women actually had a body mass index (BMI) of 30 (the cut-off point for obesity).

### Racial opposites

By contrast ‘virtually no’ white women with a BMI of 25 (the top end of the ‘normal’ range) thought they were underweight. ‘It’s clear that this kind of difference in weight perception must be driving some of the differences in actual weight outcomes,’ noted Wittenberg.

When it came to financial income, black men and black women put on weight as income increased, although black men increased their girths ‘not nearly as quickly’ as black women. Wittenberg said he could ‘only speculate that it has something to do with perceptions of beauty and attractiveness – there’s clearly a desire to put on weight among a big chunk of black women’.

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Across the entire income range, the percentage of obese black men was 9% versus 32% among black women (obese measured as a BMI of 30). In direct comparison the average obesity rate among white men and women stood at 24% and 28% respectively.

In the ‘very much lower’ income brackets the trend was in the opposite direction with white women heavier than black women. However, as income increased the black women rapidly gained weight while white women rapidly lost it.

### White men are short-term ‘fat cats’

While black men’s girths increased with their income, the curve rose and then fell in an ‘odd hump shape’ for white men.

Wittenberg said among all age and race groups the weight gain graph rose steeply as they moved towards the age of 50 years, with the gradient for black women the steepest. Less surprising was that respondents with cars and TVs (especially TVs as they are associated with a sedentary, ‘snacking’ lifestyle) were heavier.

‘This makes a lot of sense. But what’s really interesting for me is that we all hope that the South African economy keeps growing and that people become richer, yet if these correlations hold true we can expect obesity to go up before it comes down.’ Projecting this forward over the next decade or two predicted a ‘real epidemic’ of weight-related diseases.

Wittenberg said one possible health extenuation was that as black South Africans became more westernised, especially women, their cultural attitudes would shift, thus mitigating the ‘fat is beautiful’ syndrome.

A delegate at a recent South African obesity conference referred to this perception, which includes high social status as the *umfazi ohamba kunyakazele umhlaba* syndrome (the woman who makes the earth tremble).

As evidence of westernisation, Wittenberg cited the growing number of young black women in gyms who were ‘as weight (loss) conscious as their white counterparts’.

However, he said, the point of his research was to highlight the average, ‘not the handful of kids at university’.

Chris Bateman