



Contact: Kristin Messina, 860-380-1282, kristin.messina@uconn.edu

For Immediate Release: November 5, 2019

Sexual Minority and Heterosexual Adults Face Similar Experiences of Weight Stigma

Hartford, CT – Many Americans who experience excess weight may also be familiar with the experience of societal shame and stigma. These occurrences of weight stigma are just as common among sexual minority adults as they are among heterosexual adults, according to a new [study](#) published in *Obesity* by researchers at the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at the University of Connecticut.

Individuals who experience weight stigma are commonly stereotyped as lazy or lacking willpower, and they can face unfair treatment because of their weight. Some individuals who experience weight stigma may also internalize these negative attitudes, blaming and devaluing themselves and having lower self-worth because of their weight. Whether weight stigma is experienced or internalized, it can have [damaging effects on health](#). While there has been increasing attention to this issue by researchers and health professionals, weight stigma has received almost no attention in sexual minorities despite increased rates of obesity and higher risk for stigma among this population.

“We know from previous research that there are consistent links between weight stigma and negative health consequences, both mentally and physically, across all body types. But there has been little attention to how weight stigma affects sexual minority adults, who may be vulnerable to unfair treatment not only because of their sexual identity, but also because of their body weight,” says Rebecca Puhl, Deputy Director of the UConn Rudd Center, Professor of Human Development and Family Sciences at the University of Connecticut, and the study’s lead author.

The study focused on more than 18,000 US adults enrolled in the WW program (formerly Weight Watchers) who completed surveys about their experiences of weight stigma, health behaviors, and quality of life. In total, 658 participants who identified themselves as a sexual minority were compared to 658 participants who identified themselves as heterosexual, matched on characteristics of sex, race, body weight, age, and education.

Findings showed that regardless of sexual orientation, more than two-thirds of respondents reported experiencing weight stigma at some point in their life. More than 50% of adults who identified as a sexual minority reported experiences of weight stigma from family members, classmates, teachers, healthcare providers, and other community members, which was comparable to reports of weight stigma experienced by heterosexual participants. The extent to which respondents experienced internalized weight stigma (e.g., blamed themselves because of their weight) was also examined. Both sexual minority and heterosexual women reported similar levels of weight bias internalization, but men who identified as gay had greater internalization of weight stigma when compared to heterosexual men.

Researchers also found that internalizing experiences of weight stigma was associated with poor mental health, less control over eating behaviors, and more eating to cope with negative emotions and stress. This was true for all respondents – regardless of sexual orientation or sex.

“Our findings show that support is needed for adults across all sexual and gender identities who face weight stigma,” says Puhl. “Increased attention is needed not only in research, but also in clinical

practice, where health care professionals working with patients who have obesity or are trying to lose weight should be aware that patients across diverse sexual identities may be vulnerable to weight stigma and its adverse health consequences.”

This study was supported by a grant from WW International Inc. Study co-authors include Mary Himmelstein of Kent State University, Rebecca Pearl of the University of Pennsylvania, Alexis Wojtanowski and Gary Foster of WW International.

###

About the UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity

The Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity at the University of Connecticut is a multidisciplinary center dedicated to promoting solutions to childhood obesity, poor diet, and weight bias through research and policy. The Rudd Center is a leader in building broad-based consensus to change diet by conducting research and educating policy makers. For more information, visit www.uconnruddcenter.org, follow us on Twitter at www.twitter.com/UConnRuddCenter, or on Facebook at www.facebook.com/UConnRuddCenter.