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Adolescents Report Increase in Weight Stigma on Social Media during COVID-19 Pandemic

Body dissatisfaction also increased during the pandemic, especially among girls and teens with higher weight.

Hartford, CT – During the COVID-19 pandemic, over 50% of adolescents saw more weight stigmatizing content on social media, according to a new study from researchers at the UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity. Teens also reported feeling worse about their bodies, which was related to increased weight stigma amid the pandemic.

As COVID-19 continued to impact society throughout last year, changes to daily life were inevitable. Stay-at-home orders resulted in less opportunities for physical activity, food shortages led to decreased access to healthy foods, and social isolation, disrupted routines, and financial insecurity within families created new sources of stress. Combined, these stressors resulted in increased risks for obesity, as well as stigmatizing weight-related communication in the media referencing the “quarantine-15,” a term for those who gained weight during the pandemic.

“Social media became a critical resource for teens to stay in touch with friends and maintain peer support while physically distanced during the pandemic, but the influx of derogatory messages about obesity and weight gain on social media also raises concerns for adolescent health,” says Leah Lessard, lead author of the study and postdoctoral fellow at the Rudd Center.

To evaluate exposure to weight stigmatizing content on social media, such as stress eating memes and weight gain jokes, researchers surveyed adolescents aged 11-17 years old in the fall of 2020. Adolescent participants also reported how their body satisfaction had changed, as well as whether they had different experiences of stigma from parents and peers since the pandemic began.

Key findings include:

- The majority (53%) of adolescents reported increased exposure to at least one form of weight stigmatizing social media content during the pandemic.

- Increases in body dissatisfaction since the COVID-19 pandemic began were common overall (41%), especially among high school students (47%), girls (55%), and those with higher body weight (51%).
- 2 out of 3 girls with higher body weight reported increased body dissatisfaction during the pandemic.
- Adolescents' experiences of weight-based mistreatment from parents and peers remained relatively consistent with their pre-pandemic experiences.

The study, published in the [Journal of Pediatric Psychology](#), is the first to examine pandemic-related changes in weight stigma and body dissatisfaction among adolescents, who are in a critical developmental stage when health behaviors are established and self-worth is shaped. Study authors say medical providers and mental health professionals should encourage families and schools to emphasize messages of health and self-compassion among youth.

“Although the long-term effects of the pandemic are yet to be seen, the way it has impacted how many adolescents feel about their bodies raises concerns for future unhealthy behaviors, including disordered eating and weight control,” says Lessard. “Sensitive and reassuring communication from parents, providers, and peers may help support adolescents through the pandemic and mitigate potentially lasting consequences.”

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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.uconnriddcenter.org, follow us on Twitter at www.twitter.com/UConnRuddCenter, or on Facebook at www.facebook.com/UConnRuddCenter.