

Anxiety can pile on the pounds

A study involving nearly 13,000 New Zealanders has shown a strong link between anxiety disorders and obesity.

Researchers from the University of Otago, Wellington, collected data during face-to-face interviews as part of Te Rau Hinengaro: the New Zealand Mental Health Survey.

Lead investigator Dr Kate Scott, said it was the first time the suspected connection between a full range of anxiety disorders and obesity had been examined.

She said: "We have shown there are clear links between obesity and some anxiety disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), some of the phobias (irrational fears), and also to a lesser degree with depression.

"People often assume that we have known about this for decades but this relationship with anxiety disorders has seldom been studied in the wider population."

Dr Scott said the relationship was actually stronger between obesity and anxieties –than with mood disorders such as depression, which tended to be a focus of previous research.

She said the findings do not prove that mental health disorders cause obesity, but poor mental health could make it hard for people to resist pressures of 'emotional eating'.

"Anxiety and stress can disregulate people's eating and they can overeat to deal with or distract themselves from an anxious state," she said. "If that happens on a regular basis, they will put on weight."

The study, among people aged 16 or over, also found that people who had post-traumatic stress disorder were more than twice as likely to be obese - this occurred in both Māori and non Māori.

"This is a new finding because previous studies have not looked at PTSD and this was the strongest link," said Dr Scott.

Other studies have shown links between childhood trauma such as sex abuse and adult obesity, as well as between past trauma and current binge-eating.

Although this study cannot determine the direction of the relationship, it is more likely PTSD would lead to obesity than the reverse, and this is backed up by other studies.

The research team investigated how obesity and mental disorders link with ethnicity, age, sex and education.

They found obesity and depression were only associated among women and people with no educational qualifications.

But the association between obesity and anxiety disorders was not affected by education and occurs in both men and women.

Dr Scott said she was "surprised" by this finding as in previous studies the relationship between obesity and mental disorders (typically depression) had nearly always been confined to women.

She hopes that the study findings will be of particular interest to GPs, who work across mental disorders and physical health.

"Generally speaking, obesity is regarded as a medical problem and not one that has a psychological dimension," she said.

"I hope that this study alerts GPs to the possibility that some people struggling with obesity may have mental disorders that interfere with weight loss attempts.

"The mental disorder needs to be treated as part of it all."

This research is part of Te Rau Hinengaro: the New Zealand Mental Health Survey and was funded by the Ministry of Health, the Health Research Council of New Zealand, the Alcohol Advisory Council of New Zealand and the New Zealand Lottery Grants Board.

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- Anxiety disorders, obesity, post-traumatic stress disorder, mental disorders

Aims of this research:

- To investigate the associations between mental disorders (in particular the anxiety disorders) and obesity in the general population and potential moderators of those associations (ethnicity, age, sex, and education).

Findings:

- Obesity and mood disorders like depression are only associated among women, and people with no educational qualifications.
- By contrast, the association between obesity and anxiety disorders occurs in both men and women, and is not affected by education.
- The association between post-traumatic stress disorder and obesity occurs in both Māori and non Māori.