

Identification as Overweight by Medical Professionals: Relation to Eating Disorder Diagnosis and Risk

Physician guidelines recommend routine screening for overweight and obesity in children and adults. In addition, insurance reimbursements are often tied to these assessments and interventions. Medical professionals are often ill equipped for this task, reporting that they lack the time and training to engage in discussions about weight with their patients. There is also concern that screening for overweight or obesity may increase the risk for eating disorders in patients identified by their physicians as overweight or obese.

A recent study by Kass et al (2015) published in *Eating Behaviors* investigated whether patients who were previously identified as overweight by a medical professional were more likely to have an eating disorder. The study included 548 women ages 18-25 that reported concern about their weight or shape and/or wanted to improve their feelings about their body and reduce stress. Participants completed an on-line screening and an in-person assessment. Information was collected from participants including medical history, current body mass index (BMI), and whether or not the participant had ever been told by a medical professional that they were overweight. Participants were assessed for eating disorder symptoms and weight concerns using both diagnostic semi-structured interviews and self-report assessments.

Results indicate that there were no significant differences between women with or without an eating disorder diagnoses in having been previously identified by a medical professional as overweight. In addition, being identified as overweight was not associated with eating disorder behaviors such as dietary restraint, binge eating, or purge behaviors when controlling for current BMI. However, being identified as overweight was significantly related to high-risk weight and shape concerns.

These results indicate that, while identifying patients as overweight is not associated with an eating disorder diagnosis or eating disorder behaviors, it is associated with increased risk factors for eating disorders and disordered eating thoughts and attitudes. The researches emphasize the need for eating disorder prevention to be integrated into obesity intervention techniques in medical settings. They suggest a focus on healthy lifestyle behaviors across the weight spectrum rather than focus on weight loss as a primary goal in improving screening and intervention techniques while minimizing the risk of eating disorders.

Reference: Kass AE, Wang AZ, Kolko RP, et al (2015). Identification as Overweight by Medical Professionals: Relation to Eating Disorder Diagnosis and Risk. *Eating Behaviors*, 17: 62-68