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Married Women, Divorced Men Gain Weight



First Love, Then Marriage, Then a Bigger Waistline

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Aug. 22, 2011

Forget the "freshman 15." New research suggests marriage and divorce can lead to significant, often unhealthy weight gain.

A study of more than 10,000 people found that marital changes can leave both partners packing on the pounds, with the most worrisome weight gain in newlywed women and recently divorced men.

"After marriage or divorce, both men and women gain weight. But women tend to gain more weight after marriage, and men tend to gain more after divorce," said study author Zhenchao Qian, a sociology professor at Ohio State University. Qian and postdoctoral student Dmitry Tumin presented their findings today at the American Sociological Association annual meeting in Las Vegas.

Previous studies have linked marriage -- considered a healthy union overall -- with weight gain, and divorce with weight loss.

"But those studies looked at average changes in weight, so you couldn't get a good picture of who was gaining or losing, or maybe gaining a lot of weight," said Qian. So Qian and Tumin sought to uncover how gender and age factor into the marital mass equation.

Using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth -- a biannual survey of men and women from 1986 to 2008 -- the researchers tracked body mass index of people who were never married, stayed married or divorced. Within two years of marriage or divorce, some BMIs ballooned. Although they can't tell why from their study, Qian and Tumin have a theory.

"After marriage, women will take care of their families and maybe eat the way their husband does or their children so," he said, explaining that the change in routine can trigger weight gain for some women. Men, on the other hand, "tend to be healthier after marriage in terms of diet," Qian said.

Married men are also more likely to go for routine checkups. After divorce, Qian said, men may lose that protection.

Marriage, Divorce Lead to Unhealthy Weight Gain

Susan Heitler, a marriage counselor in Denver and author of poweroftwomarriage.com, has another theory.

"Joy and grief are strong emotions that can lead to an increase or decrease in appetite," Heitler said, adding that newlyweds often gain small amounts of weight because they're content. But in people who are newly divorced, depression can cause substantial weight gain.

"There's an impulse to self-soothe with food combined with a drop in self-control that comes with depression or grieving," Heitler said. "People will think, 'Not only do I feel like eating a candy bar, but I just don't have the will power to say no.'"

Although the study focused on changes in marital status, other family entrances and exits can affect weight and health, too.

"The birth of baby, when the kids go to college, marriage, divorce or, God forbid, a death," said Heitler. "When people's lives change, there's different work to be done. Sorting out who does what on top of being physically exhausted can impact health."

People who married or divorced in their 30s were more at risk for unhealthy weight gain than those who married or divorced in their 20s, with the effect growing stronger with age, Qian said.

"I think the takeaway message is that people need to be more conscious of changes in weight," Qian said, adding that single subjects "stayed in the marriage market" seemed to have better control over their weight. "Marriage is good for you, there's plenty of literature to support that, but you still need to watch your weight."