

Weight Stigma in Healthcare

A Barrier to Effective Patient Care

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Healthcare providers

Express stereotypes that patients with higher weight are:

- Lazy
- Unmotivated
- Lacking self-control
- Lacking willpower
- At fault for their weight
- Poor at self-management
- Less compliant

- Doctors*
- Nurses
- Dietitians
- Obstetricians
- Mental health professionals
- Physiotherapists
- Occupational therapists
- Exercise physiologists
- Medical students

*Levels of weight bias in doctors are similar to the general population

(Sabin, Marini, & Nosek, *PLoS One* 2012)

Huizinga et al., *Obesity* 2010; Incollingo Rodriguez et al., *BMC Pregnancy Childbirth*, 2020; Jungnickel et al., *Ther Adv Endocrinol Metab* 2022; Lawrence et al., *Obesity* 2021; Mold & Forbes, *Health Expect* 2013; Mulherin et al., *BMC Pregnancy Childbirth*, 2013; Panza et al., *Obes Rev*, 2018; Phelan et al., *Obesity* 2014; Sabin, Marini, & Nosek, *PLoS One*, 2012; Tomiyama et al., *Obesity* 2015; Zaroubi, Samaan, & Alberga, *J Obes* 2021.

Patients view healthcare providers as common sources of weight stigma

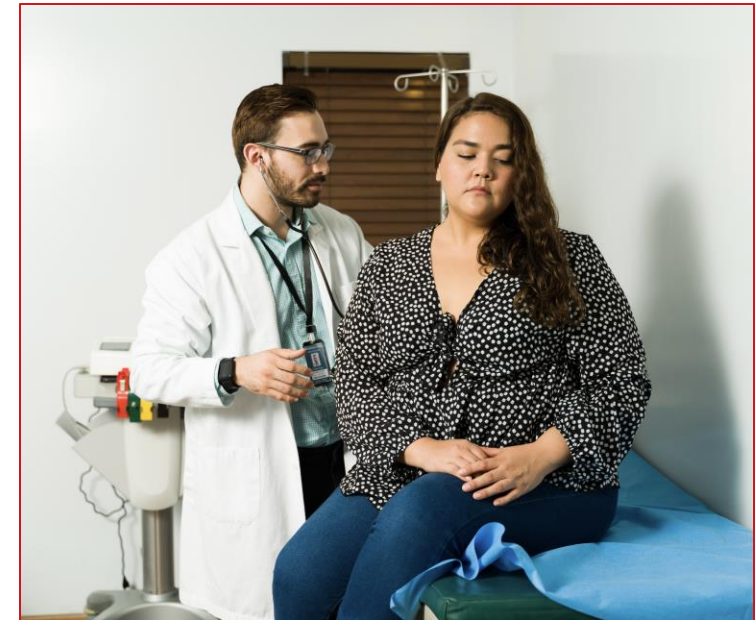
Patient Sample (N)	Source of Weight Stigma	% of Patients Reporting Stigma
Adults engaged in commercial weight management (N=13,996) ¹	Doctors	67%
	Nurses	32%
	Dietitians	28%
Adults engaged in commercial weight management (N=18,796) ²	Healthcare Providers	46%
Women enrolled in a weight loss support organization (N=2,449) ³	Doctors	69%
	Nurses	46%
Adults with type 2 diabetes (N=1,212) ⁴	Doctors	44%
Patients with obesity (N=178) ⁵	Healthcare Providers	52%
Postoperative bariatric surgery patients (N=300) ⁶	Doctors	62%
	Nurses	45%

¹Puhl et al., *PLoS One* 2021; ²Pearl et al., *Obes Sci Pract* 2019; ³Puhl & Brownell, *Obesity* 2006; ⁴Himmelstein & Puhl, *Diabet Med* 2021; ⁵Pearl et al., *Obes Facts* 2018; ⁶Raves et al., *Front Psychol* 2016.

Weight stigma hinders healthcare delivery

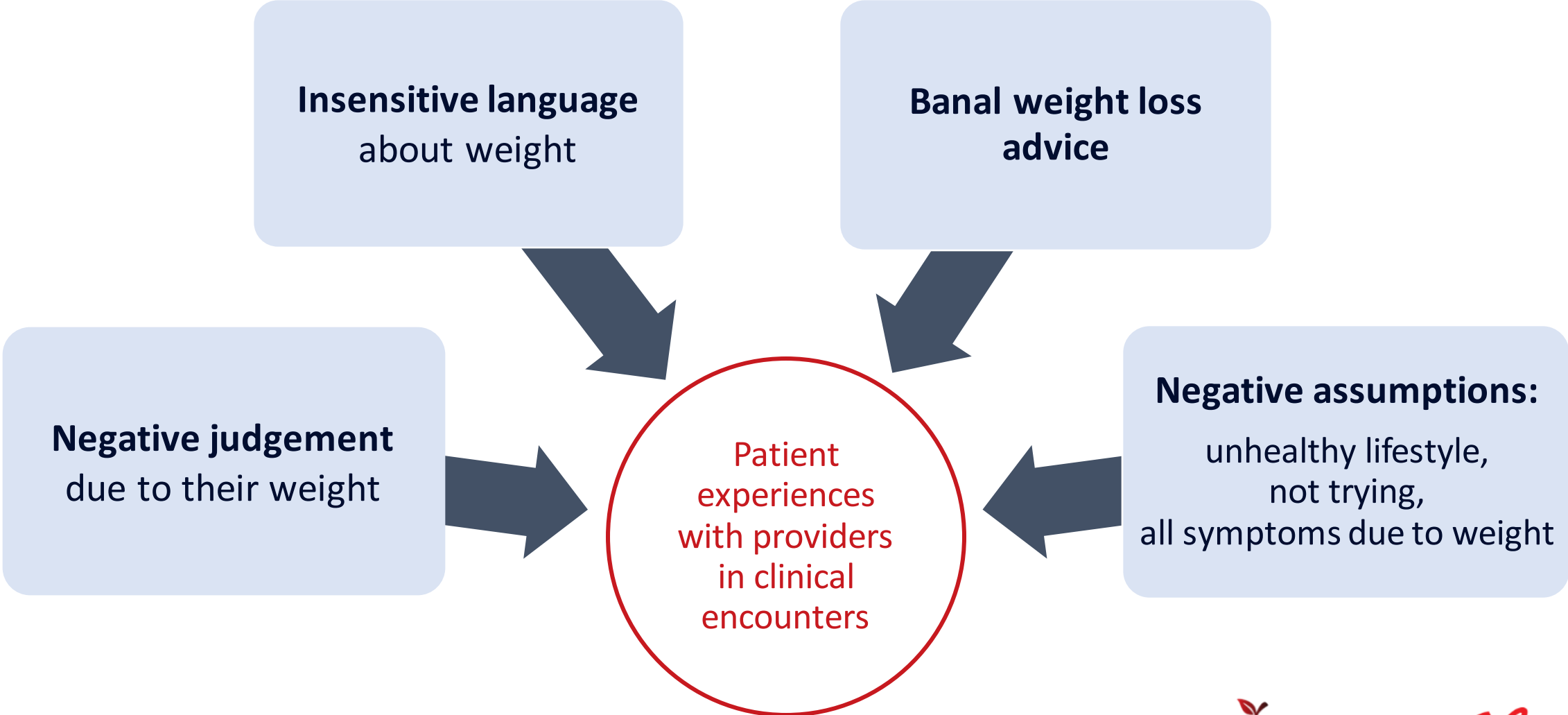
Compared to healthcare delivery with lower BMI patients, when interacting with higher weight patients, providers:

- Spend less time in appointments
- Demonstrate less rapport
- Engage in less patient-centered communication
- Engage in less discussion and intervention
- Report lower respect for patients as their BMI increases



Amy et al., *Int J Obesity* 2006; Gudzone et al., *Patient Educ Counsel* 2014; Gudzone et al., *Obesity* 2013; Hebl & Xu, *Int J Obesity* 2001; Huizinga et al., *J Gen Intern Med* 2009; Phelan et al., *Obes Rev* 2015; Tilburt et al., *Patient Educ Counsel* 2019; Wong et al., *Patient Educ Counsel*, 2015.

Patient perspectives of clinical encounters

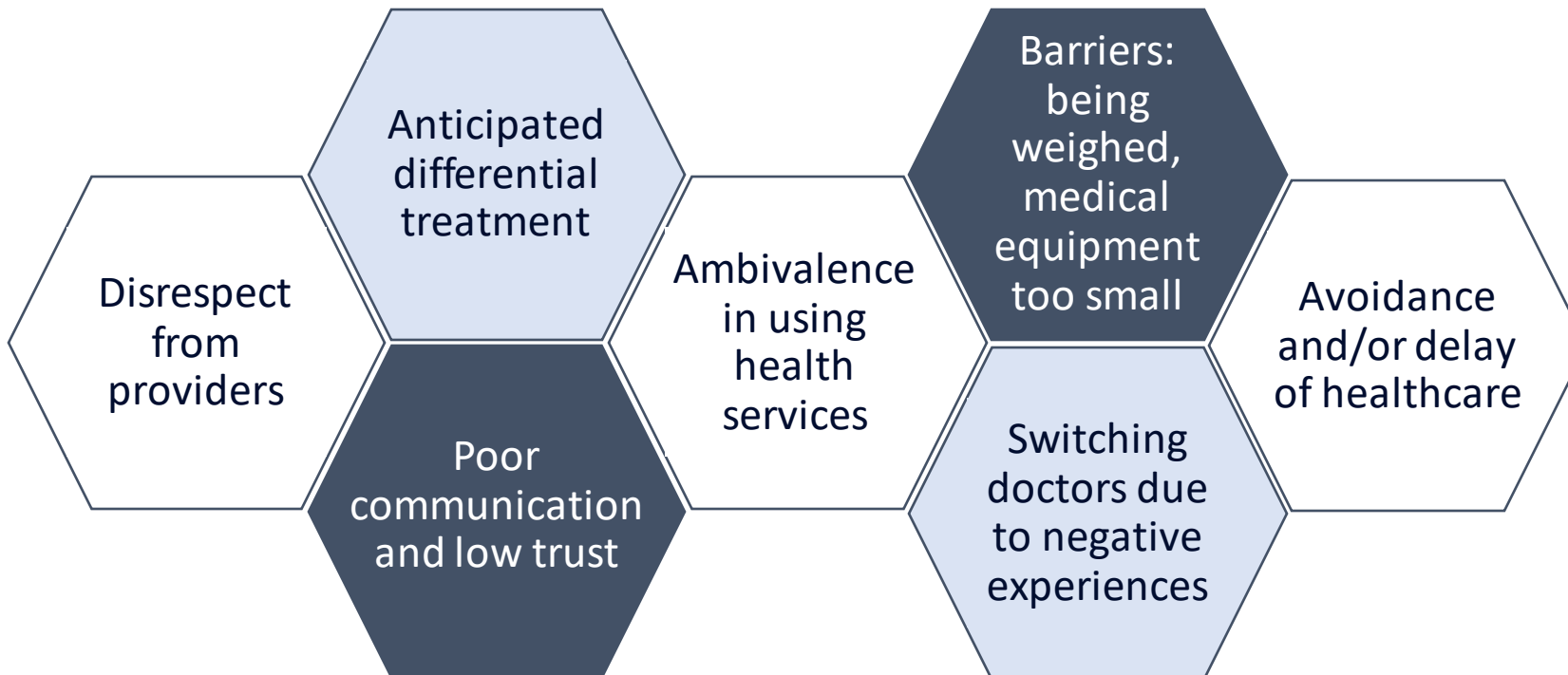


Ananthakumar et al., *Clin Obes* 2020; Farrell et al., *Obes Rev* 2021; Gudzone et al., *Pat Educ Couns* 2014; Incollingo Rodriguez et al., *BMC Pregnancy Childbirth*, 2020; Mold & Forbes, *Health Expect* 2013; Sagi-Dain et al., *Isr J Health Policy Res* 2022.



Patient experiences in primary care

Additional stigma-related themes affecting patient experiences in primary care¹:



With each increase in a patient's BMI category, there is approximately a 2-fold increased likelihood of perceiving stigma in primary care²

¹Alberga et al., *Primary Health Care Research & Development* 2019

²Ferrante et al., *Obes Sci Pract* 2016

Patient avoidance of healthcare

N=498 White and Black women with BMI>25

- *Disrespect from providers*
- *Unsolicited advice to lose weight*
- *Medical equipment too small for body*
- *Embarrassment at being weighed*

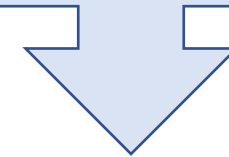


Contribute to delay and avoidance
of preventive healthcare

Amy et al., *Int J Obesity* 2006

N=2380 primary care patients with BMI>25

- *Stigma experienced in healthcare*
- *Lower patient-centered communication*
- *Lower perceived respect from providers*



Mediate associations between patient
BMI, avoidance of healthcare,
and changing doctors

Phelan et al., *Obes Sci Pract* 2021

Provider communication plays a role

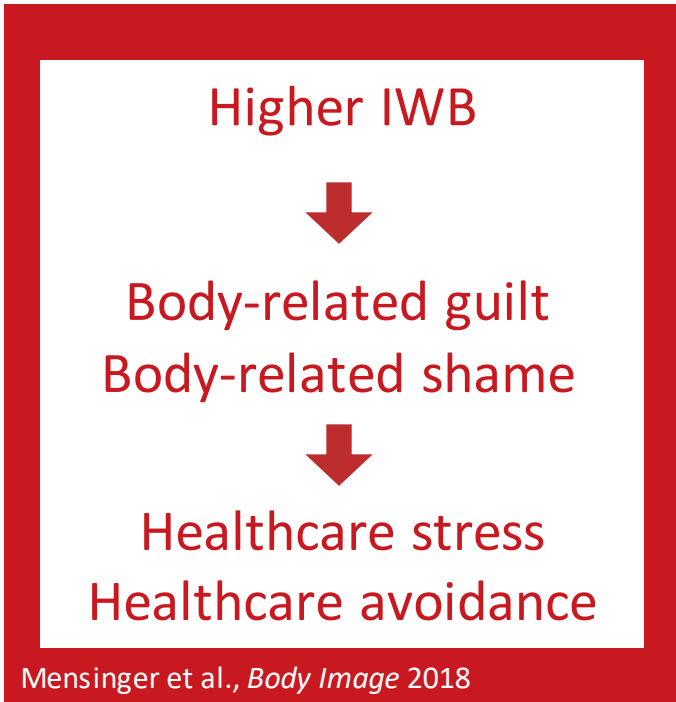
If your doctor referred to your (or your child's) weight in a way that makes you feel stigmatized, how would you react?

Reaction to stigmatizing language	Adults (N=1,064)	Parents (N=445)
Seek a new doctor who is more sensitive about weight	21%	35%
Avoid future appointments with my doctor	19%	24%

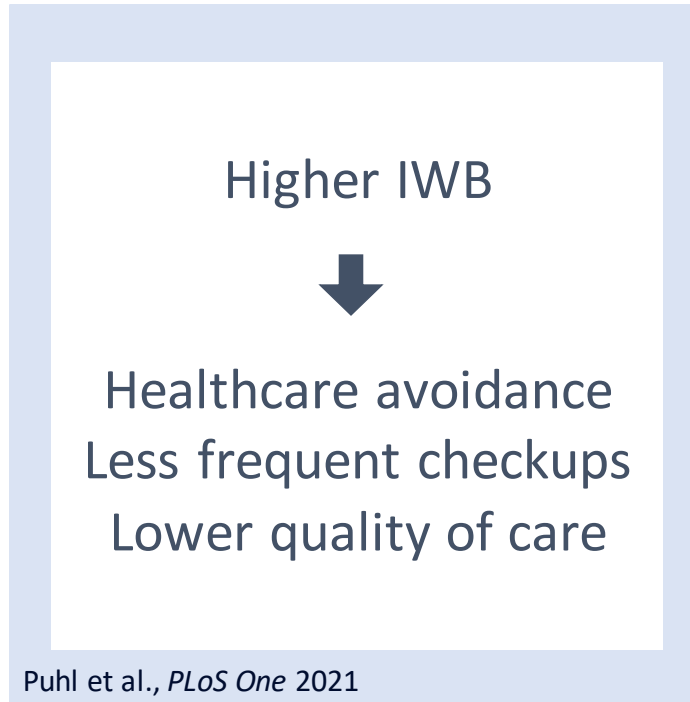
Puhl, Peterson, & Luedicke, *Pediatrics* 2011; Puhl, Peterson, & Luedicke, *Int J Obesity*, 2013

Internalized weight bias (IWB) plays a role

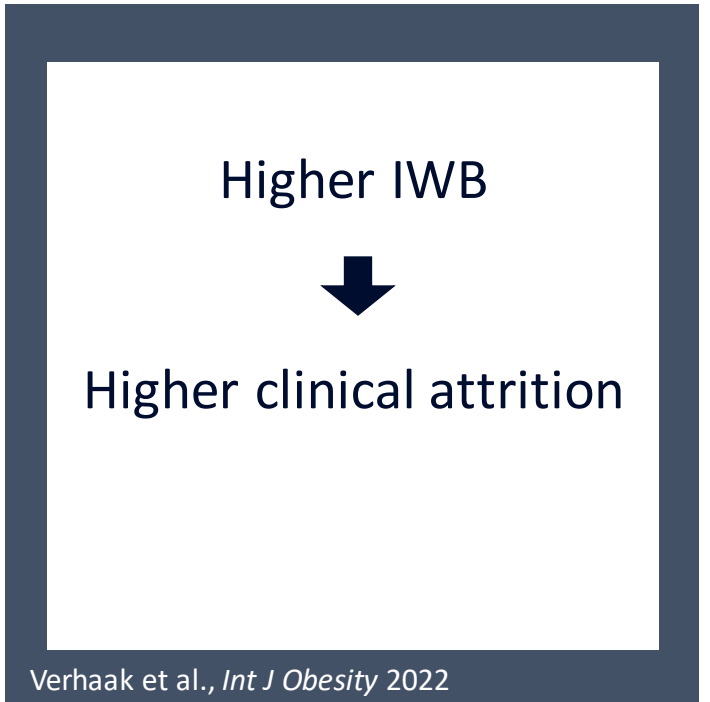
N=313 women (mean BMI=28)



N=13,996 adults in commercial weight loss program (mean BMI=30)



N=120 patients in a medical weight loss program (mean BMI=41)



All studies accounted for demographics and relevant covariates

Addressing weight stigma in provider-patient interactions

Strategies to reduce weight stigma in healthcare must address communication:

- Self-awareness of bias
- Education about stigma
- Respectful language
- Supportive counseling
- Patient-centered approaches

