

FAQs about Weight Discrimination

What is weight discrimination?

Discrimination is defined as unfair difference in treatment made between people because of specific characteristics. It is based on prejudice, which is defined as preconceived opinion or judgement without just grounds or before sufficient knowledge. In its extreme, discrimination is called bigotry, which is defined as obstinate and unreasoning attachment to one's own opinions, with intolerance to any opposing views. When the specific characteristic is body size and weight, that is weight discrimination, weight prejudice, or weight bigotry.

Is weight discrimination much of a problem?

Yes. In our culture, people who are larger than average encounter discriminatory attitudes and are denied equal opportunity in many areas of their lives:

- Prospective employers often refuse to hire large size people, especially in jobs where employees do physical work, or jobs where employees interact with the public.
- Large people are subject to harassment about their weight by their employers, are kept in jobs beneath their abilities, and are often demoted or fired because of weight prejudice.
- Physicians and other health care professionals often tell fat patients to lose weight rather than treating them for their specific medical condition.
- Health care equipment (such as cat scans and MRIs) are often inaccessible to large people.
- Large people are systematically denied health insurance and life insurance, or are forced to pay higher premiums than those of average weight.
- Applicants are often turned down by colleges, universities, and other educational institutions because of their weight.

- Landlords, housing agencies, and real estate agents often deny larger people apartments, or show them only inferior locations, to prevent them from moving into the neighborhood.
- There are many other aspects of weight discrimination. The Council has consulted with a person who was denied membership in a traveling choir because of her weight, large-size couples who were turned down as adoptive parents, and a man who was asked to accept a refund on his gym membership because customers had complained that they didn't like to look at his body.
- Public facilities are inaccessible to many large people because of turnstiles, narrow armchairs, narrow doors, hallways, stairs, and small bathrooms.
- Airplanes, trains, and buses often have seating that is uncomfortably small or tight for larger-than-average-people.

Isn't it true that fat people are lazy, stupid, weak-willed, lacking in ambition, selfish, greedy, gluttonous, sedentary, and ugly?

No, none of these characterizations have any basis in fact. These are false stereotypes that are used to justify the prejudice and discrimination that fat people suffer. The same stereotypes have been used against Native Americans, Mexicans, African Americans, poor people, and other groups that have been subject to systematic discrimination by the dominant culture of the United States and other countries. People of all sizes, classes, and ethnic groups have positive and negative qualities. Some may have personality traits of which we don't approve, but it is unfair to make a judgement about an entire group based on a stereotype or based on a stereotype or based on one individual's behavior...

Doesn't an employer have the right to refuse to hire fat people?

An employer can insist that a job applicant be qualified to do the job, likeable, and personable, but any criterion which excludes an entire group of people-African Americans, people with disabilities, or larger-than-average people is unacceptable.

Doesn't an employer have the right to fire or demote employees if they gain a lot of weight?

The only valid criterion for job evaluation, raises, promotions, disciplinary action, demotion, or firing is job performance. If an employer thinks an employee's weight

hinders their ability to do the job, the employer should discuss this with the employee and make a determination, not make a judgement about the person's ability based solely on their weight.

What if the job is a fire fighter or some other position that requires physical fitness?

Employers have the right to require a test of physical fitness for any job that requires strength, agility, or stamina. If the position requires a person to be able to carry a hose up a ladder, then the job interview can and should include a simulation of that situation. If the applicant can perform the task to the employer's satisfaction, it should not matter what the applicant weighs. Conversely, just because a job applicant is thin does not mean that he or she is physically fit or capable of handling a strenuous job.

What if the job is a waitress or a receptionist or salesperson or someone else who has to deal with the public all the time?

Employers can insist that their public representatives be well groomed, appropriately dressed, and personable. It is wrong to assume that fat people are not capable of serving the public well. Consider comedian and talk show host Rosie O'Donnell. She is charming, engaging, immensely popular, and makes her guests feel welcome. She has stated on network television that she weighs over 200 pounds. But she would obviously be an excellent candidate for any position that required interaction with clients or members of the public.

Isn't it true that fat people take up too much space on buses, trains, and airplanes?

This question has made headlines because of the notoriously cramped seating on airplanes, and a lawsuit in which a fat person sued an airline for requiring her to buy two seats. But airlines and other carriers do not state that they are selling a certain amount of space. They advertise fares for passage for one adult from one point to another. Truth in advertising requires that they provide that passage. If they want to change their policy and state that they are selling a certain number of inches of space, then they will have to give discounted rates to those who are smaller than average.

Aren't Americans getting fatter and fatter?

Yes, the statistics show that the average weight of people in this country is going up.

Isn't this because of people being gluttons and not doing any exercise?

No. The reasons for our increasing average weight have much more to do with changes in the economy. We were once an agrarian society, and most people did physically demanding. Today, most people's work requires little or no physical activity. Cars and public transportation are so available that walking and bicycling are no longer common modes of transportation. In addition, our style of preparing and eating food has changed completely. We used to prepare food from scratch in the home, and eat most meals at home. Today, most people eat a substantial portion of their food outside of the home. Food is no longer scarce, and is in fact universally available and widely advertised. Huge industries compete with each other to make their food more enticing, more available, and cheaper than that of their competitors. Advertisers are not under any pressure to sell healthy food, so they advertise what will tempt people to eat as much as possible.

Isn't it unhealthy to be fat?

Sometimes. While some fat people are unhealthy, there are some people who can be both fat and healthy. Fatness by itself is not a disease, but rather a risk factor for certain chronic diseases, such as diabetes. That means that in a group of fat people, you will find more diabetics than in a group of thin people. There is a correlation between fatness and diabetes. Scientists have not, however, proven that fatness causes diabetes. Correlation is not the same as causation. Some researchers have proposed that there is another unknown factor that causes both the diabetes and the fatness.

Poor nutrition and lack of physical activity have, however, been proven to be unhealthy. This is true no matter whether a person is thin or fat.

Even if it were proven that being fat was always unhealthy, the problem is that we do not have a cure for fatness. (Also see the answer to the following question.)

Shouldn't we do something about the increasing weight of Americans?

Yes and no. Good public health policy demands that we address the problems of poor nutrition and lack of physical activity. Pre-schools, elementary schools, high schools, and colleges should be providing nutrition education, healthy food choices, and opportunities for physical activity for students. Business should provide similar opportunities for their workers. Government programs should subsidize such opportunities for poor people. And there should be public advertising campaigns that teach people the benefits of eating nutritious food and getting enough physical activity.

However, it is wrong-and counter-productive-to make such an educational campaign into a weight-loss program. First of all, knowing a person's weight is not the same thing as knowing whether they eat healthy food or whether they get enough exercise. Thin people need this education just as much as fat people. And secondly, all currently known weight-loss techniques have been abysmal failures. More than 90% of dieters regain the weight they lost. No other medical recommendation has such a high failure rate. Until science has come up with a way for people to lose weight and keep it off permanently, it is useless to recommend weight loss. It may even be damaging to the public health, since there is some evidence that repeated diets can lead to binge eating, choosing much less healthy foods, and many dieters end up regaining more weight than they lost. Some feel that the diet craze in the last few decades is at least partly responsible for the increasing rates of obesity in America.

Isn't it true that fat people use up more than their share of the public health care dollar?

No. As a society, we have chosen to join together and share in the funding of public health care. Many of us also pay for private health care and/or health insurance. We do not get to pick who deserves what portion of the resources available. Athletes use more health care services because they are at higher risk for broken bones, injuries to soft tissues, etc. Those who drive cars put themselves at greater risk for traffic accidents. Older people use a majority of the public health care dollar. And to use a truly parallel example, poverty is a risk factor for most major diseases. Poor people use more public money on health care, and have worse outcomes.

The difference is that our society does not disapprove of athletes or car drivers, and we recognize that it is unfair to blame poor people or old people for their greater use of health care resources. But when it comes to obesity, weight prejudice makes our society intolerant. We blame fat people for their condition no matter what the real cause. We blame fat people for not losing weight, no matter how difficult or impossible that might be. We blame fat people for using more than "their share" of health care resources. Our society does this because of prejudice, bigotry, and intolerance against those who are heavier than average.

What is the origin of weight discrimination?

There are several theories for the origin of our culture's disapproval of fatness. Since it seems to have started in the early part of the twentieth century, some say it started with motion pictures, since they say "the camera puts on 15 pounds." One theory says that the beginning of ready-to-wear clothing changed everything. Until the early 1900s, all

clothing was custom-made, so a person's size was of no significance. Once clothing was manufactured in a range of sizes, anything outside that range started to be considered different, or not "normal."

Since weight discrimination affects women disproportionately, some feel that the disapproval of larger body size has its roots in the rise of women's power. After women won the right to vote and started participating as full active members of society, many men felt threatened by women's power and stature, and there was a backlash against feminism. Even today, successful women are constrained by the cultural pressure that forces them to spend enormous amounts of time and money on their appearance. A large portion of that time and energy is spent on the obsession with thinness and the fear of fatness.

Still another theory holds that fear of fatness is akin to fear of pleasure and bodily indulgence. Since the United States was partly founded by strictly religious, fundamentalists Puritans, this theory says that our culture has an underlying fear and distrust of pleasure, including the pleasure of eating as well as sex. This explains why some people consider themselves righteous when they abstain from food, sex, or leisure, or when they exercise obsessively. According to this theory, those with more fat on their bodies are perceived to be self-indulgent, which is said to justify any disrespectful treatment they might receive.

Are things getting better or worse for fat people today?

It is difficult to say. Some ways that things are getting worse include: An increasing number of weight-loss advertisements, including fraudulent weight-loss scams; the rise in the number of people (mostly women) with eating disorders, indicating that fear of fatness is increasing; and increased bullying, harassment, and violence against fat children and teenagers.

On the other hand, there are some indicators that the situation is improving for larger people. There is a lot more career clothing available for larger man and women, indicating that job opportunities may be opening up. There are new social opportunities for larger people opening up all the time, as indicated by the many websites, social clubs, conventions, and gatherings specifically for larger people. Larger actors are seen in substantial roles in movies and on television, and some of them are portrayed as romantic interests. And more and more books and articles talk about the possibility that large people can have good self-esteem and full, active, and happy lives.