



“This shows us that it’s not only us women who have unrealistic perceptions of our weight, but that the perceptions tend to transfer between the sexes, leaving both sexes with this perception,” says the researcher, who is a little surprised at this finding.

”When men start to perceive women as overweight even before they are, it goes against the general idea that men like women with shapely figures.”

#### **We also have mistaken views of our kids**

Christensen is keen to point out that men’s and women’s ideals as such are outside the scope of this study.

Yet she has no doubt that when both men and women tend to overestimate a woman’s weight, there is a clear influence coming from the very slim female ideals portrayed in the media.

The ideals do not only apply to adults – they also influence how adults perceive children. This is demonstrated in a parallel study in which Christensen studied how parents perceive their children’s weight.

“We’re seeing the same pattern here,” she says. “Parents tend to regard girls as overweight and boys as underweight. It’s as if we’re being harder on our daughters than our sons.”

While some parents overestimate their daughter’s weight, there are other parents who don’t perceive their kids as being overweight even though they in fact are.

#### **Unrealistic conceptions of weight affect health**

Christensen is not surprised by the difference in physical ideals between the sexes:

“Men are supposed to be muscular and strong protectors, so it’s fine for them to be big – whether it’s fat or muscle could be of less importance,” she explains.

“At the same time there seems to be an ideal that associates femininity with slimness.”

But underestimating or overestimating your own or your partner’s weight could be problematic:

On the one hand it’s a sign of a general health problem when men and women overestimate their own weight – and that’s an increasing trend, according to an American study from 2008.

“If you don’t think you’re overweight, there is less chance that you’ll make an effort to lose weight,” she says.

#### **Distorted body image puts pressure on women**

On the other hand, the distorted body image can put an unnecessary pressure on women:

“It could mean that some women go around worrying about their weight for no reason and could end up miserable because they fail to live up to the existing ideals.”

This is particularly true for very young girls who may find themselves pressurised into losing weight even before they actually have a problem.

Christensen encourages parents and health authorities to make an effort to distinguish between what is health and what is merely signals from the media.

“But this isn’t easy, because there are people who really have to deal with obesity,” she admits.

“On the one hand we must take care not to turn weight and health into an all-encompassing problem; on the other hand there is a need to highlight the problem for certain groups of people.”

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 [It's not just adult women who are misjudged about their weight. Parents also tend to make wrong judgments about their kids? weight. \(Photo: Colourbox\)](#) [13]

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Fact box

Body Mass Index (BMI) is the official method of estimating overweight and underweight.

BMI is defined as the individual's body weight divided by the square of his or her height.

<18.5: Underweight

18.5-24.9: Normal

25-29.9: Overweight

30-34.9: Obese

35+: Severely obese

A person’s BMI score is an indication of the relationship between height and weight, and doesn’t say anything about how much of the weight comes from fat and how much from muscle.

Fact box

In her study, sociologist Vibeke Tornhøj Christensen made a comprehensive statistical analysis of data from 1,019 people.

One of the uncertainties related to this study is that the participants were asked to state their own and their partner’s height and weight.

Previous studies have shown that people tend to say they weigh a bit less than they actually do. That could mean that the men actually underestimate their own weight even more than the study suggests, and that perhaps the women don’t overestimate their own weight quite as much as suggested.

However, since this possible under-reporting applies to men and women alike, it may not affect the gender differences indicated in the study.

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Dann Vinther

February 26, 2012 - 01:45

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