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Misperception of weight status and associated factors among undergraduate students



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KEYWORDS

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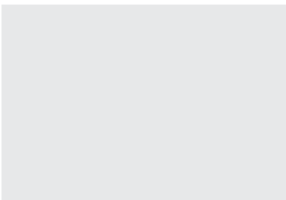
Summary

Problem: We compared participants' self-perception of their weight with the World Health Organisation (WHO) definition for BMI categories among undergraduate university students undertaking health related academic programmes in Ghana. Also, we investigated factors associated to the underestimation of weight status in this sample.

Methods: This cross-sectional study was conducted among a sample of 368 undergraduate students. Anthropometric measurements of weight and height were measured with appropriate tools and computed into Body Mass Index (BMI) categorised based on WHO classifications. Waist and hip circumferences were also measured appropriately. Participants' self-perception of weight status was assessed by the question: How do you perceive your weight? (a) Underweight, (b) normal weight, (c) overweight, and (d) obese. The *BMI-measured* weight status was compared to the self-perceived weight status by cross-tabulation, Kappa statistics of agreement and χ^2 for trend analysis. Factors associated with misperception of weight status was measured using univariate and multivariable analysis.

Results: Thirteen percent ($n = 48$) of the participants were *overweight/obesity (BMI)* and 31.5% had central obesity. Overall, 20.6% of the participants misperceived their weight status in which 78.9% of them underestimated it. Among *overweight/obese* participants, 41.7% self-perceived themselves accurately. Whereas 10.6% of *normal weight* participants underestimated their weight status, over half (58.3%) of *overweight/obese* participants did so. Factors that were associated with underestimation of weight status were having *overweight/obesity (BMI)* and central obesity.

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Conclusion: Underestimation of weight status was frequent. Health professionals and related government agencies should develop intervention programmes to empower young people to have accurate weight status perception.

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Introduction

The prevalence of overweight/obesity continues to rise steadily in both developed and developing countries [1]. In the United States (US) the prevalence of obesity has increased from 12.0% to 34.9% [2–5] and half of its adult population, 20 years and older is either overweight or obese [5].

Young adults are not left out of the overweight/obesity epidemic. A study among University students in Nigeria reported an obesity prevalence of 21.0% [6]. An overweight/obesity prevalence ranging from 2% to 40% has been reported among young adults in Greece [7], Slovakia [8], India [9], and the US [10].

The causes, prevention and outcomes associated with obesity are complex [11]. Leading experts in obesity have emphasised the need for more interdisciplinary research into this condition [1]. An area in need of further research is that of the psychosocial influences on, and self-perceptions of, body weight and health [1]. Misperception of weight status, a distortion between actual and self-perceived body weight, places underweight, normal weight and overweight/obese individuals at risk [12]. Eating disorders and unhealthy weight control practices are associated with normal weight/underweight individuals, self-perceiving themselves as overweight [13,14]. Conversely, overweight and obese individuals underestimating their weight status are unlikely to engage in weight control practices or seek medical attention and are also at risk of obesity-related diseases [15].

In the transtheoretical model stage of precontemplation, there is no intention by the individual to change behaviour in the foreseeable future, and individuals are unaware or underestimate their problems [16]. It is pertinent that the issue of excess weight or weight gain is recognised by the individual to enable him/her chart on a pathway of achieving healthy weight.

Several studies have reported misperception of weight status in adults and the youth [12,17–21].

Even though misperception of weight status among adults has been reported elsewhere [17,22], studies on self-perception of weight status among young adults in Ghana and the rest of sub-Saharan Africa are limited. With a predominant culture that considers being overweight/obese as a sign of well-being and beauty, coexisting with emerging trends of young women being concerned about their weight and specific body parts and young men worrying about their height, strength and overall physical condition [12], it is pertinent to investigate the prevalence of weight status misperception among young adults in Ghana, a developing country undergoing nutrition transition. This will help in designing weight management programmes to curb the rising prevalence of overweight and obesity.

Firstly, we intended to compare self-perception of weight status with the World Health Organisation's (WHO) definition for BMI categories. Secondly, we investigated factors (socio-demographic, anthropometric and weight management behaviours) that are associated with underestimation of weight status.

Methods

Ethics statement

All data collection methods complied with the guidelines of the Ethics Committee of the University for Development Studies, School of Medicine and Health Sciences, Ghana, which subsequently approved the study. Each participant signed an informed consent form included in the questionnaire. All informed consent procedures were approved by the Ethics Committee of the University for Development Studies, School of Medicine and Health Sciences, Ghana.

Study design and participants

From January to July, 2013, this cross-sectional survey was undertaken with a sample of 368

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