

Is perceived racism a risk factor for obesity?

Does perceived racism contribute to higher rates of obesity among African-Americans? The question is complicated.

“Right now, the literature is not at all consistent on the question of whether exposure to racism increases obesity risk,” says Anissa I.



PHOTO BY LINDA KASTLEMAN

Dr. Anissa Vines

Vines, PhD, epidemiology research assistant professor at UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health.

Vines co-authored a study published in *American Journal of Epidemiology* (March 2008), which found that higher levels of perceived racial discrimination might be protective against hypertension. She also was lead author for a study that found a relationship between a larger waist-to-hip ratio and daily life stress and passive emotional responses to racism but could not support the hypothesis that racism, a chronic stressor, was associated with increased abdominal fat (*American Journal of Public Health*, March 2007). “Other researchers *have* shown a positive association between racism-related

variables and obesity,” Vines says.

Vines continues to explore some of these associations with the help of a questionnaire – the telephone-administered perceived racism scale – which she developed in collaboration with clinical psychologist Maya McNeilly, who designed the original perceived racism scale.

“I am beginning to explore what it really means when an African-American person reports limited or no experiences of racism,” Vines says. “Maybe being able to acknowledge and report racism provides a protective psychological effect.”

Vines also is examining early life exposures to stress and perceived racism.

“We don’t know very much about how perceived racism acts as a stressor,” Vines says. “Multiple stressors can be in play at any given time. How one perceives those stressors, and how those stressors interact with other social and environmental factors, are important to explore.”

–Angela Spivey