



Weight Gain Related to Length of Stay in Forensic Institution

SUMMARY PREPARED BY: N. ZOE HILTON, PH.D., C.PSYCH.

WHAT DID WE DO & WHY?

People with mental disorders die younger than those without, largely due to preventable causes such as heart disease. Weight and obesity are risk factors for heart disease. Many studies show that drug treatments for mental illness cause people to gain weight. However, this research rarely includes forensic patients, who are admitted to forensic hospital because of their involvement with the criminal justice system. We studied the medical records of 291 men admitted to a forensic hospital, in order to see whether they gained weight each month during their stay. We tested whether some patient characteristics, or aspects of their treatment — e.g. medication — increased their weight gain.

OUR FINDINGS WHAT'S NEXT?

When they were admitted, 1 in 3 men were in the “obese” range. 1 in 5 met basic criteria for metabolic syndrome, which is a combination of body mass index, blood pressure, and waist circumference that increases the risk of heart attacks. About half the patients were weighed again before they were discharged—they gained an average of nearly 4kg per month. Weight gain was not related to medicines prescribed for mental illness, or to lack of physical activity or social activity. Instead, weight gain steadily increased over time in hospital.

We have gathered information on more patients. We have also added more measures, including the results of bloodwork for cholesterol and blood sugar. We are currently analyzing these data for our next study. In our research, we did not weigh patients but took information that was already recorded in their medical records. Also, we did not look at their diet. More research is needed that takes these factors into consideration.

KEY MESSAGES

- Patients in forensic hospitals should be routinely weighed
- Patients’ risk of metabolic syndrome should be monitored when given drugs for mental illness
- Behavioural treatment of unhealthy weight gain and other risk factors is advised