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Troubled teens buckle under weight of jibes

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In the first survey of its kind in Hong Kong, 22,612 adolescents aged between 11 and 18 from 42 randomly selected secondary schools were questioned.

Their responses were used to examine the effect comments about their weight by family members, peers and others had on them.

The accuracy of the comments was judged against the actual weight status of the respondents.

Tracy Lo Wing-sze, a biochemist and PhD student in public health at the University of Hong Kong who helped carry out the study, said in general around 8 percent of teenagers in Hong Kong are underweight and 12-14 percent are obese.

"The most important point is that, even if the students are normal weight, they receive lots of comments - and they are wrong comments," she said.

Lo said parents should be careful not only what they say to teenagers but also how they say it, adding that the tone of their comments can be important.

"Adolescents who receive incorrect comments will be put at increased risk of weight misperception and also have poor psychological health," she said.

The study found teenagers who received such comments had a 19 percent higher risk of suffering headaches, 26 percent higher risk of feeling stress and 38 percent higher risk of feeling depressed than those who did not receive any weight comments.

The calculations were arrived at after adjustments for age, sex and family socio-demographic factors.

The researchers said that even if the comments about a teenager's weight were accurate, they could have negative consequences.

"Receiving correct comments will induce stress because the comments truly reflect their weight status, which may itself be stressful if they really are too fat or too thin," they said.

Assistant professor in public health Daniel Ho Sai-win said parents should "realize the potential adverse effects of inaccurate weight comments about their children and give only objective and constructive advice."

Most of the comments the teenagers received about their weight were from their mothers and siblings. Fewer came from fathers.

Mothers, the study found, were also more likely to comment more often than classmates.