

TIME

Men vs. Women: Who Gains More Weight After Marriage and Divorce?

By Alice Park

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Marriage and divorce are life-changing events, the effects of which are evident in innumerable ways — including on the bathroom scale.

Both marriage and divorce appear to lead to weight gain among couples, but each occasion affects men and women differently, according to a new study. Researchers from Ohio State University found that women tended to gain more weight than men after marriage, while after a divorce, men's girth expanded more than women's.

Previous studies of weight gain and coupledness have looked at average gains and losses, but sociology professor Zhenchao Qian and his doctoral student Dmitry Tumin decided to break down the weight effects by gender to better understand whether marital transitions affected men differently than women.

The researchers looked at survey data from a nationally representative sample of more than 10,000 men and women who were 14 to 22 years old when the survey began in 1979. The participants were questioned every year until 1994, and then every other year afterward.

The scientists found interesting gender differences when they focused on the two-year mark after a marriage or divorce. Although both men and women who married tended to gain weight

compared with their counterparts who stayed single, women tended to gain more weight than men.

Two years after a divorce, separated partners tended to be heavier compared with couples who remained married, but conversely, men posted larger weight gains than women.

The study did not delve into what particular lifestyle habits — in diet or physical activity, for example — may have changed after either marriage or divorce to lead to weight gain, but the relationship between weight and life events remained strong after the researchers accounted for potential confounding factors such as race, obesity at the start of the study, education and income.

Qian and Tumin have some theories, based on previous research by others on the subject. Following marriage, the researchers suggest, wives may encourage their husbands to adopt a healthier lifestyle, helping men maintain their weight or even lose a few excess pounds. After divorce, however, men may return to their pound-packing habits.

Women, on the other hand, may tend to eat more and exercise less after getting married and starting a family because of the stresses of child bearing and maintaining a household.

"Marital transitions, like any change in life, have an impact on people," says Qian. "There is a shock to these events, and our research shows that men and women deal with them differently. Never-married women tend to take care of their health and body more carefully than never-married men, for example, so after marriage, women are more likely to gain compared to their never-married counterparts. Men, on the other hand, gain from the supervision that comes with being part of a family, so they tend to lose weight after marriage compared to women."

The effects were strongest among those who were 30 or older at the time they married or divorced. Younger people didn't show as consistent a pattern in weight gain or loss after such events.

The new data are being presented on Monday in Las Vegas at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association.

Alice Park is a writer at TIME.