Mismatch between perceived and actual overweight in diabetic and non-diabetic populations: a comparative study of South Asian and European women

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Diabetes is more common in South Asian (defined here as Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin) populations compared with Europeans. This may be related to their greater abdominal obesity. Weight loss and maintenance are crucial in the prevention of non-insulin dependent diabetes mellitus and motivation to lose weight is likely to be greater in those who perceive themselves as being overweight. We compared self perception of body weight using data on South Asian and European women (data unavailable for European men) from a population based study in Newcastle upon Tyne, UK.

### Methods

Age stratified random samples of South Asian and European women aged 25–74 were taken from the Family Health Service Authority register. Altogether 589 South Asian and 682 European women were contacted. From these 371 South Asian and 399 European women were screened giving a response rate of 63.0% and 58.5% respectively. Of these, 319 South Asian and 382 European women had a standard World Health Organisation (WHO) oral glucose tolerance test. Prevalence of impaired glucose tolerance (IGT) and diabetes were based on two hour plasma glucose values according to WHO definitions: > 7.8 and < 11.1 mmol/l for IGT; ≥ 11.1 mmol/l for diabetes. Known diabetes and self perception of body weight were identified by questionnaire. Subjects were asked, “for someone of your height, do you think you are: very underweight, a little underweight, about the right weight, a little overweight, very overweight.”

Among those perceiving themselves as the right weight:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perception as the right weight (n (%))</th>
<th>Total number (n)</th>
<th>Normoglycaemia</th>
<th>Previously unknown diabetes/IGT</th>
<th>Known diabetes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SA</td>
<td>EU</td>
<td>SA</td>
<td>EU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number (n)</td>
<td>366</td>
<td>371</td>
<td>213</td>
<td>326</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception as the right weight (n (%))</td>
<td>137 (37.4)</td>
<td>79 (21.2)</td>
<td>93 (44.1)</td>
<td>68 (22.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>n (%)</em> actually overweight (BMI ≥ 25 kg/m²)</td>
<td>60 (43.5)</td>
<td>5 (6.3)</td>
<td>38 (40.4)</td>
<td>2 (2.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>†n (%)* with abdominal obesity (waist ≥ 80 cm)</td>
<td>75 (55.6)</td>
<td>9 (11.3)</td>
<td>45 (48.9)</td>
<td>4 (5.8)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Proportion (%) of overweight (BMI ≥ 25 kg/m²) in those who percieved themselves as the right weight.
†Proportion (%) of abdominal obesity (waist ≥ 80 cm) in those who perceived themselves as the right weight.
‡The numbers in the all group are the total number of South Asian and European women who responded to the questionnaire question of “for someone of your height, do you think you are: very underweight, a little underweight, about the right weight, a little overweight, very overweight.”

Results

South Asians are a heterogeneous group, and in this study consisted of Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi women. All analyses were performed separately in these groups but self perception as the right weight was similar (Indian (32%), Pakistani (37%) and Bangladeshi (38%) therefore further analyses was carried out on South Asian women as one group.

Compared with Europeans, a significantly (p<0.001) higher proportion of South Asian women were overweight (64.9% v 52.4%, 95% CI for the difference, 5.6 to 19.4) had abdominal obesity (71.0 v 40.6, (23.7 to 37.1) %) and previously undiagnosed diabetes and IGT (26.6 v 14.4, (6.4 to 18) %) as well as known diabetes (13.0 v 2.1, (7 to 14.8) %). Among those who perceived themselves as the right weight (table 1), a significantly higher (p <0.001) proportion of South Asian compared...
with European women were overweight (43.5 v 6.3, (27.3 to 47.0) %) and had abdominal obesity (55.6 v 11.3, (33.4 to 55.2) %). Ethnic differences in perceptions of being the right weight were seen in the normoglycaemic, previously unknown diabetes/IGT and known diabetes groups. More South Asian compared with European women who perceived themselves as the right weight and who had previously undiagnosed diabetes and IGT were actually overweight (53.6 v 30.0%) and had abdominal obesity (64.3 v 50.0%) but this difference was not significant (p>0.05). Similar patterns were seen in South Asian women with known diabetes.

Discussion
There are major differences in awareness of obesity in South Asian women. Known diabetic patients could be expected to have more realistic body weight perception as a result of diabetes education. However, differences in self perception of obesity existed in normoglycaemic, previously unknown diabetes and IGT and known diabetes groups. Although the differences were not significant because of small numbers among the previously unknown diabetes and IGT and known diabetes groups it was still evident that there was greater awareness of obesity among the European compared with South Asian women. Reduction of obesity is crucial in the prevention and management of diabetes and appropriate education and awareness of obesity needs to be given to South Asian communities. Differences in self perception that may be attributable to differences in knowledge, beliefs and social circumstances need to be taken into account when designing preventative and treatment interventions in South Asians.

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