**Question:** Is there a correlation between the longer someone is unemployed and the more likely they are to be overweight/obese?

**Key words**: Unemployment, unemployed, weight, overweight, obese, body mass index (BMI)

**Classification NHS Classification (NHS 2019)**

Obesity: BMI of 30kg/m2 +

Overweight: 25-29.9kg/m2

Healthy weight: 18.5-24.9kg/m2[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Summary**

There is evidence in the literature that unemployment is related to being overweight/obese. Weight gain is particularly linked to job-loss or change in job status and this can be due to stress, lack of sleep, change in eating behaviours and physical activity. However, there is also evidence that long term unemployment can be related to a low BMI and a general unhealthy weight. More research is required on the long-term effects of unemployment on body weight.

**Relationship between length of unemployment and body weight**

In the last few decades there has been an increased body of research investigating the link between unemployment and being overweight or obese. Studies have been conducted in the US and across Europe to identify a correlation. *Population-level rates of unemployment have been positively associated with BMI and obesity in both cross-sectional (Akil L., 2011); (Slack T., 2014) and longitudinal analyses (Latif, 2014). The associations for women have been more consistent, with unemployed women more likely to be overweight and obese than their employed counterparts (Kang H.-T., 2013); (Rosmond R., 1999); (Sarlio-Lahteenkorva S., 2006).* 2

*Studies of individual-level employment history in samples of mixed sex found that more prolonged experience of unemployment was associated with higher BMI (Schunck R., 2010) and higher odds of obesity, particularly for women (Laitinen J., 2002)*. Taken together, these studies provide evidence of an link between unemployment and weight gain, but there are still questions about whether unemployment leads to weight gain.2

A 2015 study ‘*Job-loss and weight gain in British adults: Evidence from two longitudinal studies*’4 looked at two groups of British adults and recorded their weight (measured and self-reported) and change in job status over a 43 and 26 month period respectively. The study found strong associations between job loss and weight gain. They concluded that psychosocial mechanisms and sleep loss may be contributing factors. “*The relatively short intervals over which weight gain became apparent suggests that longer periods of unemployment or insecure employment may have substantial cumulative effects on population weight status and health.”*4 A 2014 Gallup survey of 5000 long term (27+ weeks) unemployed Americans and 13000 short term (-27) unemployed Americans found that those who had been out of work for a year were much more likely to be obese than those unemployed for a shorter time.[[2]](#footnote-2)

There are a number of studies which investigate the link between unemployment and poor health. Different factors which are a result of unemployment may affect weight such as stress, change in eating habits or change in physical activity. A 2017 ‘*Active Lives Survey’* report by Sports England reported that “*people who are long term unemployed or who have never worked are most likely to be inactive (37%)”[[3]](#footnote-3)*compared to those in employment. The NHS physical activity guideline for adults’ states that adults should aim to be physically active every day and do at least 150 minutes of moderate intensity activity to maintain a healthy weight[[4]](#footnote-4), however low mood, lack of money (for gym membership of equipment) and lack of sleep can effect motivation.

A 2017 UK study[[5]](#footnote-5) of 10737 working age adults in the UKHLS longitudinal survey found that “*Jobseekers were more likely to be underweight than never-unemployed participants.”* And that “*Jobseekers were less likely to be overweight than never-unemployed participants.”* They also found that for non-smokers, there was an increased chance of being overweight and unemployed. Hughes and Kumari concluded that unemployment may have divergent associations with BMI for different groups. Underweight and overweight associations were more apparent for longer-term jobseekers, men, and jobseekers from lower-income households. The study also highlights that both weight loss and weight gain can be associated with unemployment.

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