“It was a novelty, eating treats every day … but recently it’s just been a nightmare”: men’s experiences of intentional weight gain during the GlasVEGAs study

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What is GlasVEGAs?

- Study investigating the effect of **weight gain** and **weight loss** on metabolism, fitness and risk factors in men (18-45 years, BMI <25kg/m²)

- Led by colleagues based in the Institute of Cardiovascular & Medical Sciences, University of Glasgow: Professor Naveed Sattar, Professor Jason Gill and Dr James McLaren

- Men required to **gain** 7% (~5kg) of baseline body weight over 4-6 weeks and supported to **lose** the weight gained over 12 weeks during the experiment

- Men receive:
  - **weekly food** as part of overfeeding protocol
  - **incentivised** to take part (£400)
GlasVEGAs Extension – Qualitative Study

Methods

• Aim(s): to investigate the ways in which younger men’s body image and psychological wellbeing are affected by intentional weight gain and explore what their experiences reveal about broader cultural meanings around food and body weight

• Semi-structured face-to-face interviews (n=31) conducted longitudinally (at pre- and post-study clinical assessments) exploring men’s experiences of taking part in the GlasVEGAs study

• Topic guide(s): expectations of weight gain; motivations for taking part; perceptions of body build/weight (pre-weight gain); experiences of weight gain (e.g. practical, physical, emotional etc.) and weight loss

• Data analysed thematically utilising framework method (Gale et al, 2013)
Motivations for taking part in the study

The men gave a variety of reasons for deciding to take part in the study, including: access to a comprehensive ‘health check’; ‘free food’; financial incentive; personal interest; and contribution to science.

‘I’ve always actually struggled to put weight on, so I thought it would be quite an interesting thing to do, to kind of gain weight and lose it again. [...] I tend to be trying to gain weight more [...] I would probably put more of a focus on how I looked, as opposed to how much I weigh – especially as a guy.’ (Philip, 28)
Some men anticipated that **gaining weight** would be **easy**, whereas others thought it would be more **challenging**

‘Gaining weight on **Christmas** and **New Year** [...] *I thought it was gonna be easy as hell.* [...] I kind o' [of] guessed it would be going [...] on my **stomach**. [...] *Kind o' [of] man tits* [...] *I’m only to gain five kilograms.*’

(Kieran, 24)

Autonomy to consume unlimited ‘**treats’/‘luxury’** foods

‘The **chocolate** and the **crisps** [...] **luxury items** and stuff like that [...] you try and keep away from, so it's **quite good** to get a bit of a **free lease** on it and just get to go all out on, pigging out.’

(Douglas, 19)
Several of the men described others’ reactions to their attempts to gain weight as a source of humour. They also reflected on how it was a ‘laugh’, ‘fun’ or ‘game’ and how easy it was to develop unhealthy eating habits.

‘I would get slagged [...] “Oh, look, here comes the fat bastard.” [...] I’m a big skinny person and they’ve just been calling me fat and I’m no’ [not] fat. “Oh, here he is. Eating again.” Things like that, just a laugh really.’ (Andy, 30)

‘Mothers, they love to feed. Whereas [...] saying “Actually, can you cook me something that’s really low fat? And I’m losing weight.” That’s [...] more intrusive, and might be more difficult. Whereas this was like “Yeah, just pile it on.” And “Here, here, have some chocolate, have a second dessert.” [...] almost as a game.’ (Philip, 28)
The majority of men said gaining weight was more **challenging** than anticipated and utilised various **strategies** to gain weight.

‘I'd get a blender, a whole tub of Ben and Jerry's, maybe four, five tablespoons of peanut butter, full fat milk, sort of Nutella, and then just blend it and drink it. Tasty. [...] Generally around sort of eleven, half eleven I would have that [...] I was **surprised** by the sheer **quantity** of what I had to eat. [...] it **took me a couple o’ [of] months to gain it** [...] definitely **harder** than I thought it would be, for sure.’ (Malcolm, 20)
Several men reported adverse consequences (e.g. discomfort, bloating and lethargy) as a result of eating increased amounts of energy dense/highly processed foods, hence struggled to gain weight.

‘It’s the chewing and it’s the constant repetition of doing it every day. [...] [it] became so tiring and then, like, you’re feeling bloated and you’re not feeling good [...] wi’ [with] me being quite a mentally strong person, being vulnerable and, for what I perceived as weak [...] “This is meant to be easy, this should be easy, it’s only a thousand calories, it’s no’ [not] that much, it’s only a box o’ [of] Pringles”’. (Andy, 30)
Some men reported **minimal/no changes** in themselves or their physical appearance, as a result of **weight gain**.

‘At first I thought I noticed [...] more weight in my stomach but then [...] I didn't seem to notice that an’ [and] then I thought, like, my stomach just looked the same. [...] But, like, it was like a struggle to see.’ (Davie, 19)
Experiences of weight gain – impact

In contrast, others perceived considerable changes such as increased body fat, decreased energy/motivation and negative psychological consequences, in response to weight gain.

‘I become out of breath much more quickly, I get tired a lot. I notice that I’m fatter than I used to be and I noticed it in places that I didn’t really expect. I looked down in the shower, one day, and noticed I have fat ankles, now. That is what I am. I am a person with fat ankles, and that was not a pleasant realisation at all. So yeah, participating, doing things was fun – the effects of it was not.’ (Kevin, 28)
Experiences of weight gain – impact

In contrast, others perceived considerable changes such as increased body fat, decreased energy/motivation and negative psychological consequences, in response to weight gain.

‘It’s probably the first time I’ve felt kind of self-conscious in any way about how I looked. But not, yeah, not to a massive degree [...] it was like a twang of self-conscious. [...] if I had put on a lot more weight, I would definitely... I could see how this would lead me to kind of not doing those kind of things, or avoiding those kind of activities (i.e. swimming/gym).’ (Philip, 28)
Closing points

• Previous research shows that young adults experience the fastest weight gain, averaging 15kg over 15 years (e.g. Ball et al, 2002)

• Young adult men (aged 18-35) are difficult to engage in healthy lifestyle interventions (e.g. Plotnikoff et al, 2015)

• These findings demonstrate:
  • ‘lad culture’/cultural constructions of masculinity influence young men’s eating habits and food consumption
  • possible for young men to gain weight gradually which may be undetected
  • men who perceive weight gain may become less motivated to engage in health behaviours (e.g. physical activity) they might have done previously
Thank you

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