

Millions Avoid Everyday Life Over ‘Seat Anxiety’

First-of-its-kind index from Numan reveals Britain’s most hated seats – and the hidden impact of not fitting into public spaces

- Airplane middle seat tops Britain’s most dreaded seat list
- Half of people with a BMI 25+ say seating worries have driven social withdrawal
- Those affected would spend £154 on average for greater seat comfort, pointing to a £1.4bn comfort tax

Britain’s first **Seat Anxiety Index (SAI)**, published today by leading digital health provider, [Numan](#), shines a light on something millions of people experience daily, but rarely talk about: the impact of not fitting comfortably into public seating.

Based on a nationally representative survey of 3,000 UK adults, with detailed analysis of 1,197 respondents with BMI 25+*, the SAI is the first UK study to measure ‘**seat anxiety**’ – a fear of not having suitably sized furniture or spaces – and how this shapes where people go, what they spend, and how they feel about themselves.

It comes as the gap widens between people’s bodies and the spaces built for them: UK waistlines have grown by around 2–2.5 inches since the early 1990s**, while economy airline seats have shrunk by about 2 inches*** – a squeeze echoed in tighter bus and train seating too.

The SAI asked people to name Britain’s most uncomfortable seats. For those living with overweight or obesity (BMI 25+) the most dreaded seats are:

1. Airplane middle seat — 34%
2. Plastic / event seating — 22%
3. Seats with immovable armrests — 19%
4. Bar stools — 19%
5. Airplane window or aisle seat — 18%
6. Bicycle seats — 16%
7. Theatre / cinema seats — 16%
8. Amusement park ride seating — 14%
9. Stadium / concert seating — 13%
10. Beach or garden deck chairs — 12%

But the research shows the impact runs deeper than a tight squeeze. Among those with a 25+ BMI who have experienced seats feeling too small, over a third (34%) say it left them feeling unhappy about their body. A further one in five (20%) say it left them feeling embarrassed and self-conscious, and the same amount (20%) say it made them feel like they stood out as ‘the overweight one.’ For many, the anxiety starts before they even sit down with 19% saying they worry in advance about how they’ll fit.

This dictates where people go and where they don’t. Half of BMI 25+ respondents have changed or cancelled plans because of how their size might affect their confidence or comfort in a public space. Among those who have avoided activities, the list is wide-ranging - from the gym

(41%) and sport (37%) to weddings and parties (24%), restaurants (22%) and work events (16%). Most strikingly, 17% have avoided a GP appointment because of concerns about their size in these spaces. And one in five (20%) have pulled away from social situations altogether.

When asked what they'd most want to get back, people pointed to everyday freedoms many take for granted: booking a flight without worrying about the seat (29%), having the option to do what other people do without thinking about it (26%) and sitting anywhere in a restaurant without needing to check first (20%).

In response, Numan is urging people to reclaim their seat – by speaking openly about their experiences to challenge stigma, demand public spaces accommodate everyone and help others feel more confident and comfortable sitting in everyday spaces.

Zoe Griffiths, VP of Behavioural Medicine and Registered Dietitian at Numan, said:

“What struck us most in this data is what people say they’ve lost. It might not seem like big things - booking a flight, choosing a restaurant, going to a friend’s wedding. Things many of us do without a second thought. But for millions of people, those moments have become something to dread, and over time their world gets smaller because of it. That’s what seat anxiety does.”

There is also a financial cost. Around a third of people have paid or considered paying an average of £154 on upgrades, extra legroom and additional space due to their size - rising to £184 for men. Applied to the estimated 26 million UK adults living with overweight or obesity, that could suggest a national ‘comfort tax’ of approximately £1.4 billion.

The research also shows how early seat anxiety can take hold. Among 18–24 year olds with BMI 25+, 21% say they first became aware their size affected their confidence before the age of 18 - many while still at school. And across nearly every measure, women are hit harder: 42% report feeling unhappy about their body as a result of uncomfortable seating, compared with 23% of men.

It’s not just those directly affected who see there’s a problem. Among the full nationally representative sample, nearly half of all UK adults (48%) believe that airlines, venues and restaurants should be clearer about seat sizes before people book. A similar proportion (47%) want more spacious seating in public spaces.

While there’s clear demand for more inclusive spaces, the research shows the challenge goes beyond design. Four in ten (40%) with BMI 25+ say they’d feel more comfortable in public seating if they lost weight, while nearly half (48%) say they’re struggling and would welcome support to get on track. A third (36%) also say they’d feel more comfortable if they knew they weren’t alone in their experience.

Zoe Griffiths added:

“The good news is that the clinical tools for managing weight are better than they’ve ever been - and with oral treatments now available, injections are no longer the only way to start a medicated programme. But the medication is only part of it. The confidence to stop checking seat sizes before you book, to stop arriving early for the right chair, to feel

comfortable in public spaces - that doesn't come from a prescription or via weight loss. It comes from proper support over time. That's what Numan's programme is built around."

For content creator Meggy Goldberger (28 from Cardiff), that change has become a reality.

"For years I dreaded flying because I knew I'd have to ask for a seatbelt extender – it was embarrassing, and it made me want to avoid it altogether. In the end, I stopped doing long-haul trips completely. But after taking control of my weight, that's changed. Last year was the first time in years I got on a plane without needing one – and now I actually look forward to travelling again."

ENDS

NOTES TO EDITORS

**Research conducted by Censuswide, among a sample of 3,000 nationally representative UK consumers. (16.06.26 - 18.06.26.) Censuswide is a member of the Market Research Society (MRS) and the British Polling Council (BPC), and a signatory of the Global Data Quality Pledge.*

***NHS England Digital, Health Survey for England 2022 - Adult overweight and obesity.*
<https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/health-survey-for-england/2022-part-2/adult-overweight-and-obesity>

****Based on FAA and industry trend data*

For more information, please visit the Numan website [www.numan.com] or contact the PR team [numan@thephagroup.com]

About Numan

Numan is on a mission to help people live happier, healthier, longer lives. We offer personalised, integrated care in one digital platform – including clinical guidance, medication, behavioural health coaching, diagnostics and supplements, to help patients take control of their health. Our focus is on supporting people with stigmatised diseases and conditions - such as obesity and testosterone deficiency - which traditionally are undertreated, mistreated or misunderstood.

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Key findings at a glance

As reported by surveyed individuals with a BMI of 25+

Britain's "worst" seats:

- Airplane middle seat (34%),
- Plastic/event seating (22%),
- Seats with immovable armrests (19%),
- Bar stools (19%),
- Airplane window/aisle (18%),
- Bicycle seat (16%),
- Theatre/cinema seats (16%),
- Amusement park seating (14%),
- Stadium/concert seating (13%),
- Beach or garden deck chairs (12%)

Emotional impact:

- Unhappy about body (34%),
- Embarrassed/self-conscious (30%),
- Feel like 'the overweight one' (20%),
- Anxious in advance (19%),
- Taking up too much space (18%),
- Less confident around others (18%),
- Isolated/excluded (12%),
- Resigned (10%)

Activities avoided:

- Gym (41%),
- Sports (37%),
- Theme parks (25%),
- Social occasions (24%),
- Eating out at a restaurant/cafe (22%),
- GP appointment (17%),
- Work event (16%),
- Flying (10%)

Seating experiences people most want back:

- Flight without worrying (29%),
- Doing what others take for granted (26%),
- Paying less to sit (23%),
- Public transport without anxiety (21%),
- Going to a restaurant without checking (20%),
- Theme park without restrictions (20%)

Financial cost:

- Average amount people have spent/considered spending: £154 (men £184, women £117).
- Under £50 (31%),
- £50–99 (24%),
- £100–149 (16%),
- £150–199 (11%),
- £200+ (17%)

Opinion on seating:

- There should be more spacious seating: 47% agree.
- Airlines, venues and restaurants should be clearer seat sizes before booking: 48% agree.
- People should not have to pay extra to sit comfortably: 46% agree.
- Public seating was not designed with my body size in mind: 27% agree.

From the full nationally representative data

Opinion on seating:

- Would feel more comfortable using public seating if I lost weight: 29% agree.
- Struggle to lose weight and would benefit from guidance/support: 33% agree.
- Would feel more comfortable using public seating if I knew I wasn't alone: 30% agree.
- Have felt judged because of my size when in public seats: 24% agree.