

# Healthy Living During Extraordinary Times: Cooking and Eating Habits

2020 AARP Healthy Living Survey of Adults Ages 50 and Older

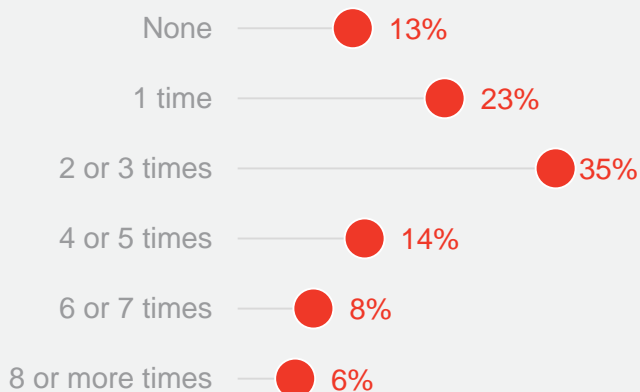


## The vast majority of older adults stay home in response to the pandemic.

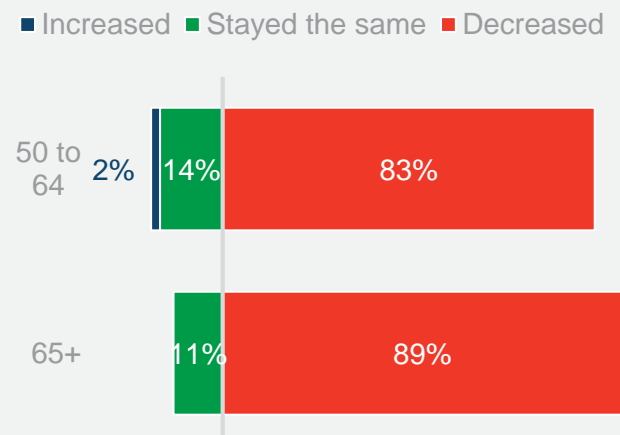
In tandem with following social distancing guidelines, older adults report they are leaving home less often in a typical week since the COVID-19 outbreak. Most (58%) say that, in the past seven days, they left their homes 1–3 times to run errands, exercise, etc. Adults ages 65+ are more likely than adults ages 50–64 to say they are leaving home less often in a typical week.

Whether eating alone or with family/friends, there is a **connection between** more older adults **cooking at home** and an **increase in positive feelings related to cooking**.

### Number of times left home in the past 7 days



### Change in times left home in a typical week Due to COVID-19 outbreak, by age group

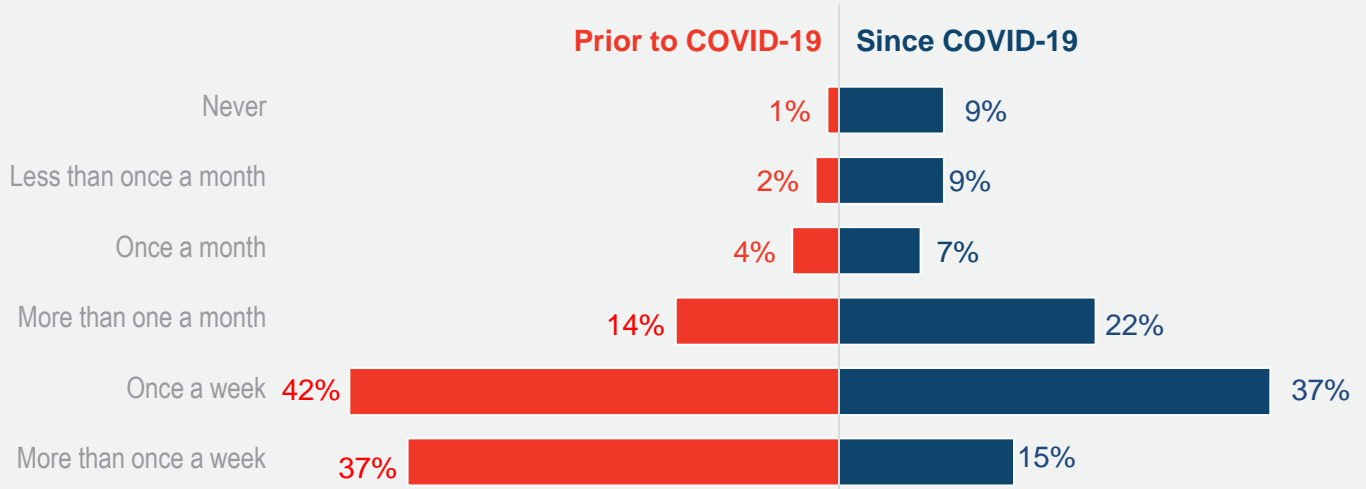


## Older adults are grocery shopping less frequently.

More than one in three (37%) older adults say, before the outbreak, they went grocery shopping more than once a week. Since the outbreak, only about one in seven (15%) say they go grocery shopping several times a week — and nearly one in ten (9%) say they never go to the grocery store. In addition to being cautious, some adults go grocery shopping less frequently because the store doesn't have what they want.

### Frequency of going to the grocery store

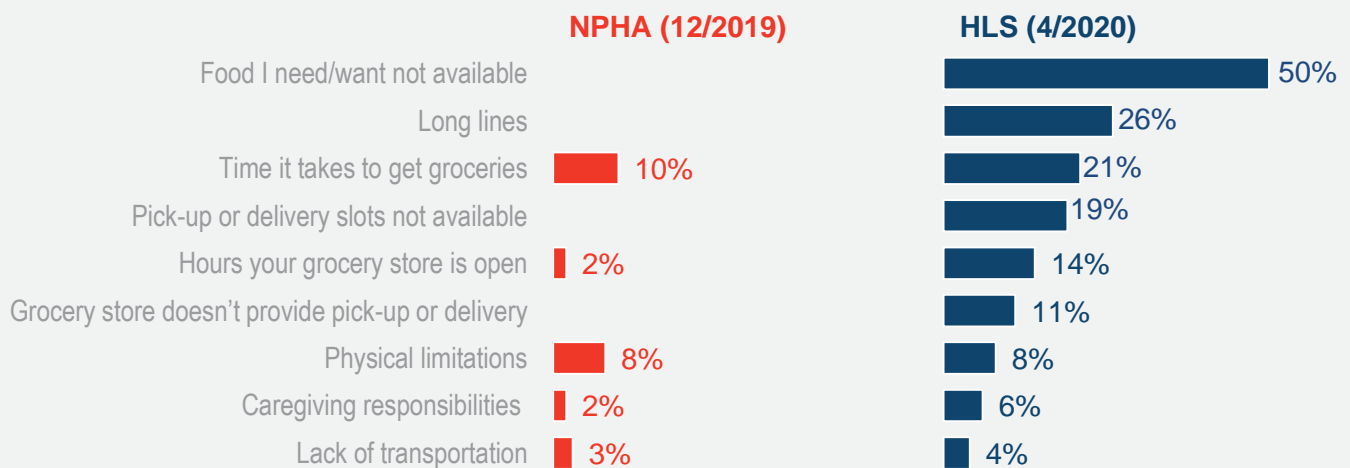
*Prior to COVID-19 and since COVID-19*



Half (50%) of older adults say that they don't go shopping because the food they want isn't currently available, and a quarter (26%) say that long lines make shopping more difficult. When comparing data collected through the National Poll on Healthy Aging (NPHA) in December 2019\*, significantly more older adults cite the time it takes to get groceries as well as the store's hours of operation as an obstacle.

### Impediments to getting groceries

*National Poll on Healthy Aging (NPHA) vs. Healthy Living Survey (HLS)*



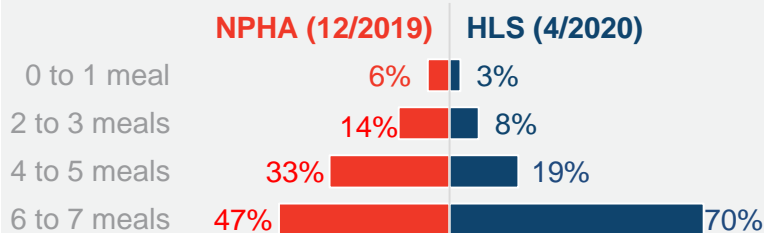
\*Wolfson, J., et al. *The Joy of Cooking and its Benefits for Older Adults*. University of Michigan National Poll on Healthy Aging. June 2020. Available at <http://hdl.handle.net/2027.42/155433>

More older adults are now cooking at home, which may be a key strategy for healthy eating.

## Older adults are having more home-cooked meals, but they are also more often eating alone.

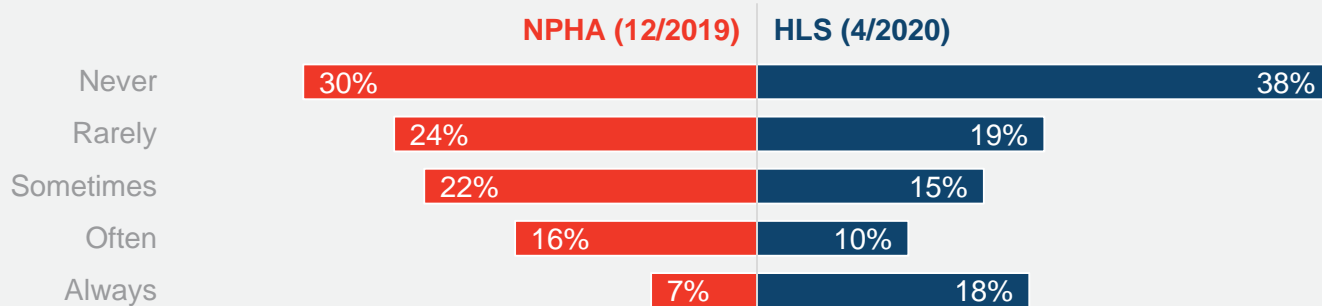
Since the outbreak, older adults are eating significantly more home-cooked evening meals. Since the NPHA poll in December 2019\*, the percentage of adults ages 50 and older who say they eat 6 or 7 home-cooked evening meals per week has increased by 23%, and the percentage who say they have eaten all meals alone in the past 7 days has more than doubled (7% to 18%). Conversely, significantly more older adults say they never eat a meal alone (30% to 38%).

### Home cooked meals for dinner/supper per week *National Poll on Healthy Aging (NPHA) vs Healthy Living Survey (HLS)*



### Frequency of eating alone

*National Poll on Healthy Aging (NPHA) vs. Healthy Living Survey (HLS)*



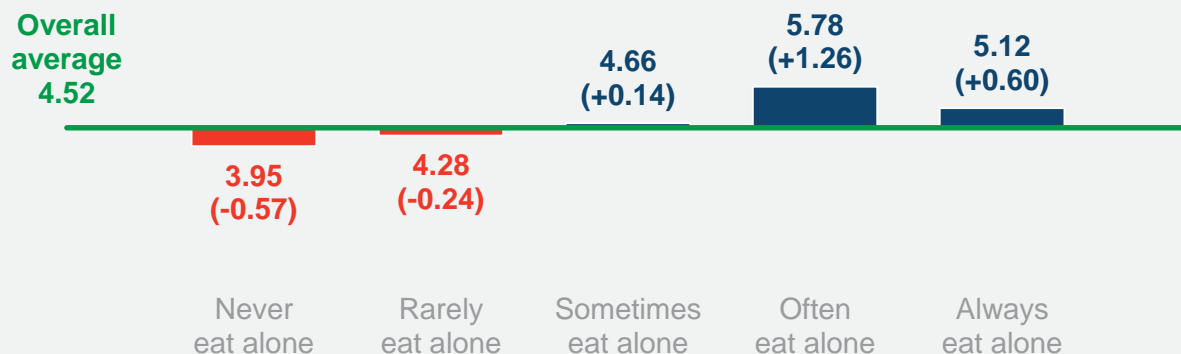
\*Wolfson, J., et al. *The Joy of Cooking and its Benefits for Older Adults*. University of Michigan National Poll on Healthy Aging. June 2020. Available at <http://hdl.handle.net/2027.42/155433>

## Lone eaters average significantly higher loneliness scores.

While the average score for older adults on the UCLA loneliness scale (ranging from 3 to 9)\* is 4.52, those who report always eating alone have an average score that is significantly higher (5.12). In fact, the average loneliness score for those who say they always eat alone is significantly higher than those who say they only sometimes, rarely or never eat alone. Older adults who report they never eat alone have the lowest loneliness scores, on average.

### Average Loneliness Score by frequency of eating alone

Numbers in parentheses are the difference versus the **overall average**

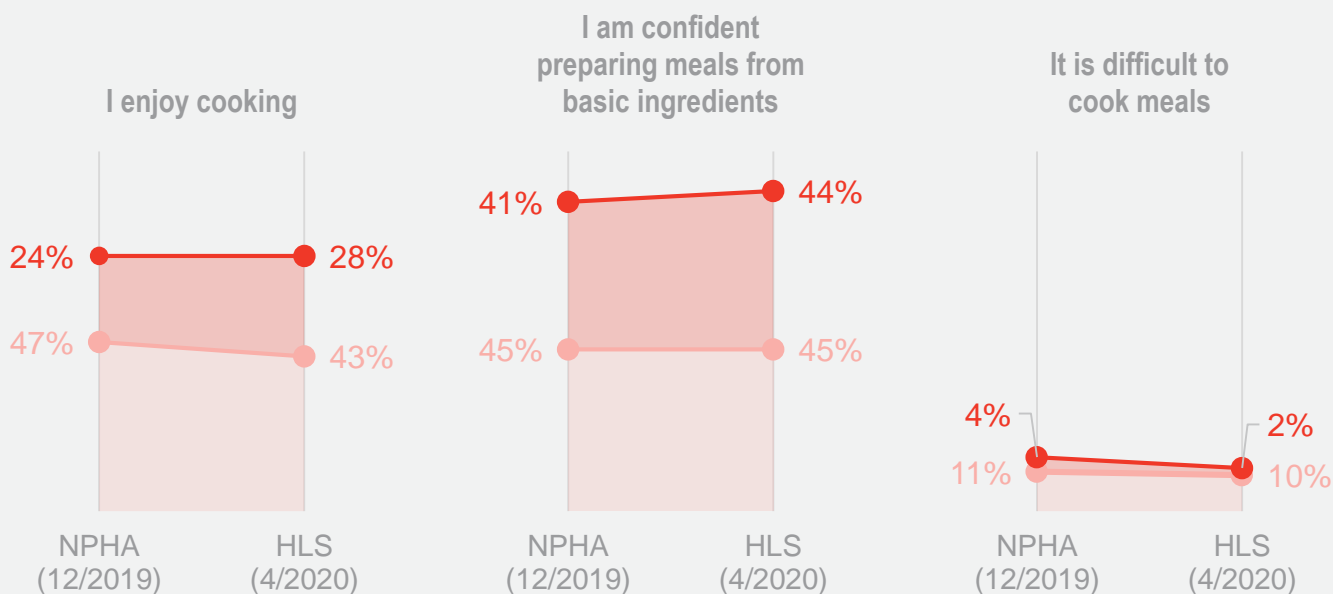


## Adults who cook at home tend to have positive feelings about cooking.

Since December 2019, before the coronavirus outbreak, more adults are expressing positive feelings about cooking. More "strongly agree" that they enjoy cooking (24% to 28%) and are comfortable preparing meals (41% to 44%), and fewer "strongly agree" with the notion that cooking meals is difficult (2% for HLS vs 4% for NPHA).

### Percent who agree or strongly agree with the following statements

National Poll on Healthy Aging (NPHA) vs. Healthy Living Survey (HLS)



\*Hughes ME, Waite LJ, Hawkey LC, Cacioppo JT. A Short Scale for Measuring Loneliness in Large Surveys: Results From Two Population-Based Studies. Res Aging. 2004;26(6):655-672. doi:10.1177/0164027504268574



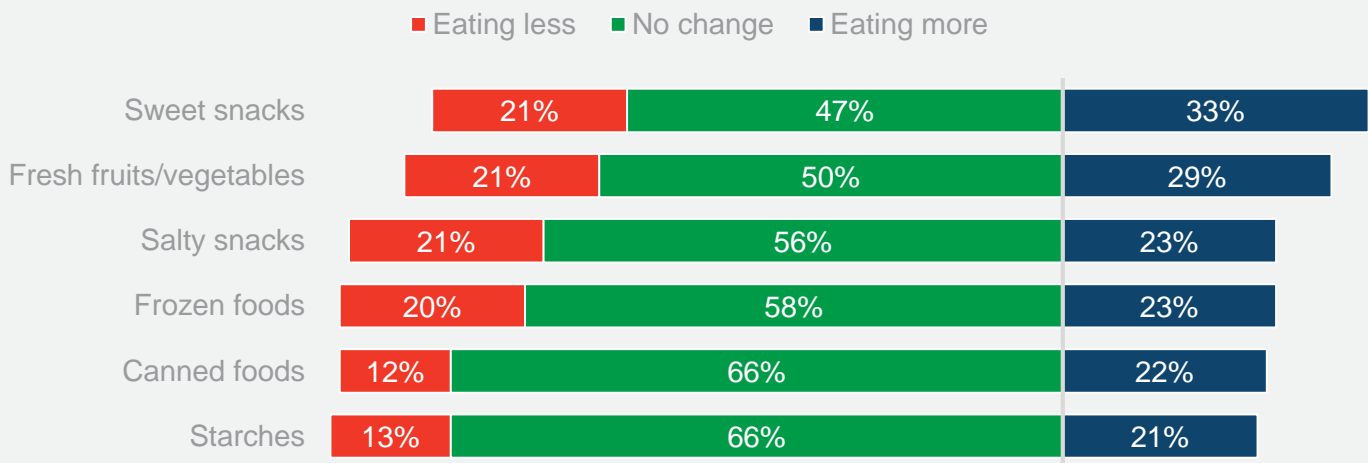


Some older adults may be eating less produce because they're going to the grocery store less frequently.

Though most older adults say their eating habits have not changed, some report that they are eating more sweets and fewer fruits and vegetables.

The vast majority (86%) of older adults say their diet is either very or somewhat healthy, and most report that their eating habits have not changed much since the outbreak. When asked about specific types of foods, however, one in three (33%) say they are now eating more sweets like cookies and candy, and one in five (21%) say they are eating fewer sweets. In addition, three in ten (29%) say they are currently eating more fresh fruits and vegetables, and one in five (21%) say they are eating fewer. Some older adults may be eating less fresh fruit and vegetables because they're going to the grocery store less frequently.

Change in eating habits of various food types  
Since COVID-19



## Increasing stress levels may be causing changes in eating habits for some.

Dealing with the outbreak has increased levels of stress for many people. Among older adults who are experiencing higher levels of stress, nearly two in five (38%) report that they have been eating more cookies, candy, and other sweets, and more than one in four (27%) say they have been eating more potato chips, pretzels, and other salty snacks. On the healthier side, nearly three in ten (28%) older adults with higher than usual stress levels also report eating more fruits and vegetables.

### Percent reporting eating more of various food types

*Among those with higher stress levels since COVID-19*



## Older adults cope with stress with a variety of activities, including watching TV or movies, listening to music, and exercising.

Although older adults say that they don't usually suffer from stress or depression, when these feelings do arise, more than half (54%) say they watch or stream movies or TV shows to help alleviate them. A little less than half (48%) say they listen to music, and more than two in five (45%) say they exercise or walk. Interestingly, more than a quarter say they deal with stress or depression by changing their eating habits. This finding coincides with other findings in this study about how the outbreak has affected older adults' eating habits. Some older adults report that they are eating more snacks now than prior to the outbreak, and those with higher levels of stress are more likely to indulge in unhealthy snacking on sweets and salty foods.

**54%**

**Watch/stream  
TV/movies**



**48%**

**Listen to music**



**45%**

**Exercise/walk**



**41%**

**Go online/Use social  
media**



**36%**

**Meditate/pray**



**37%**

**Read a  
book/magazine**



**34%**

**Sleep in/go to  
sleep/nap**



**27%**

**Eat comfort foods**





**The AARP Healthy Living survey of 1,101 adults ages 50 and older gauged the impact of the recent coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on issues related to maintaining a healthy life style. The survey includes modules related to changes in habits such as diet and exercise.**

## Implications

Maintaining a healthy lifestyle during unprecedented times is a challenge for anyone. This study suggests that the responses to the COVID-19 pandemic such as social distancing have resulted in more older adults cooking their evening meals at home and eating alone. Whether eating alone or with family and friends, older adults who cook at home have more positive feelings about cooking. These positive feelings may encourage older adults to cook meals at home and to eat a healthy diet. Unfortunately, increasing stress during the pandemic may derail these healthy eating efforts. Some older adults report they are eating more unhealthy foods like cookies, candy, and potato chips. Those who are experiencing higher levels of stress are more likely to report this change in their eating habits. The good news is that few adults over the age of 50 report extremely high levels of stress, and many say they engage in a variety of activities to reduce stress, including exercising, streaming TV and movies, and listening to music .

## Methodology

This AARP Healthy Living survey was conducted online from April 14 through April 17, 2020 with a total sample of 1,101 adults ages 50-plus. This national survey was conducted using NORC at the University of Chicago's AmeriSpeak probability-based sample. AmeriSpeak, is designed to be representative of the U.S. household population. All data are weighted by age, gender, and race according to the most recent Census population statistics. The margin of error for the national survey is  $\pm 4$  percent.

AARP is a co-sponsor of the University of Michigan's National Poll on Healthy Aging (NPHA). The NPHA started in 2017 and is a recurring, nationally representative household survey of adults age 50 to 80. To learn more, visit <https://www.healthyagingpoll.org/>



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