

Healthy Living During Extraordinary Times: Exercise and Stress

2020 AARP Healthy Living Survey of Adults Ages 50 and Older

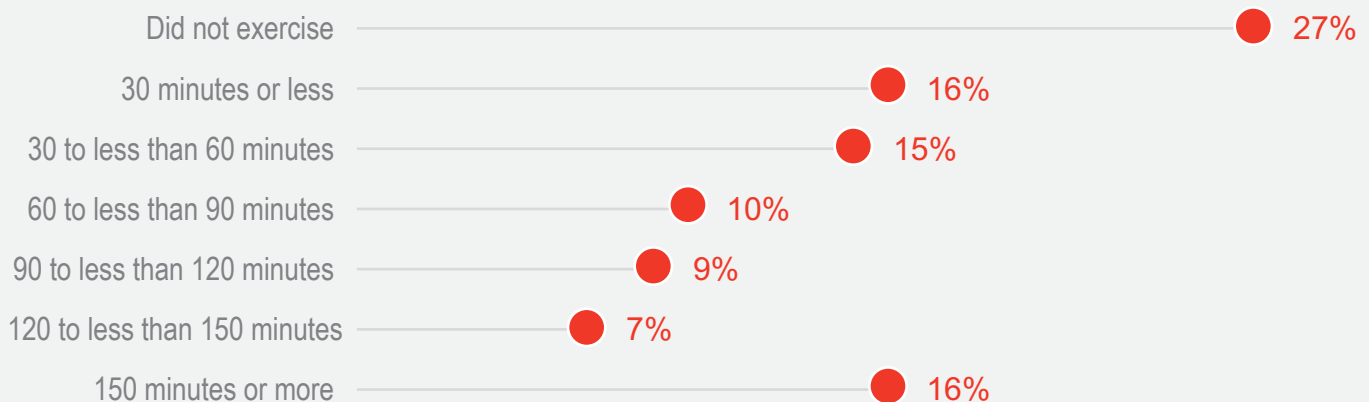


Most older adults report maintaining some level of exercise prior to the COVID-19 outbreak.

The majority (73%) of older adults age 50 or older report they maintained a regular exercising routine prior to the COVID-19 outbreak. Three in ten (31%) report they exercised up to 60 minutes a week. Nearly one quarter (23%) reported they exercised at least 120 minutes per week, with about one in six (16%) reporting they exercised at least 150 minutes per week prior to the COVID-19 outbreak.

Major finding: Regardless of exercise level, older adults who **maintain their exercise** regime during these unprecedented times have **lower stress** levels and lower negative feelings such as loneliness and depression

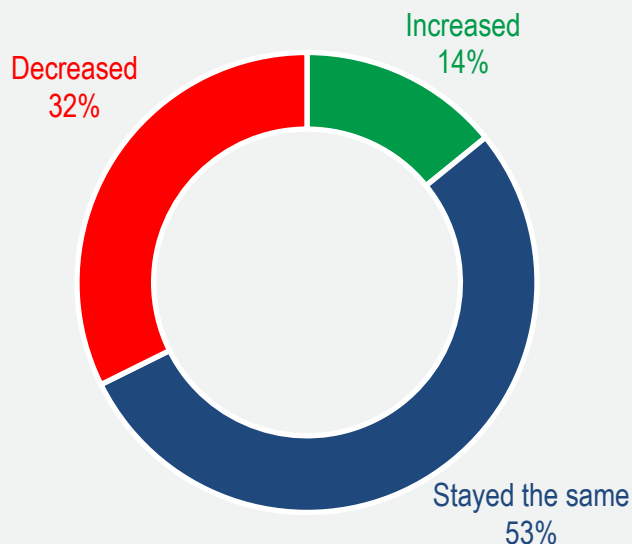
Minutes of exercise per week prior to COVID-19 outbreak



COVID-19 outbreak negatively impacts some regular exercisers.

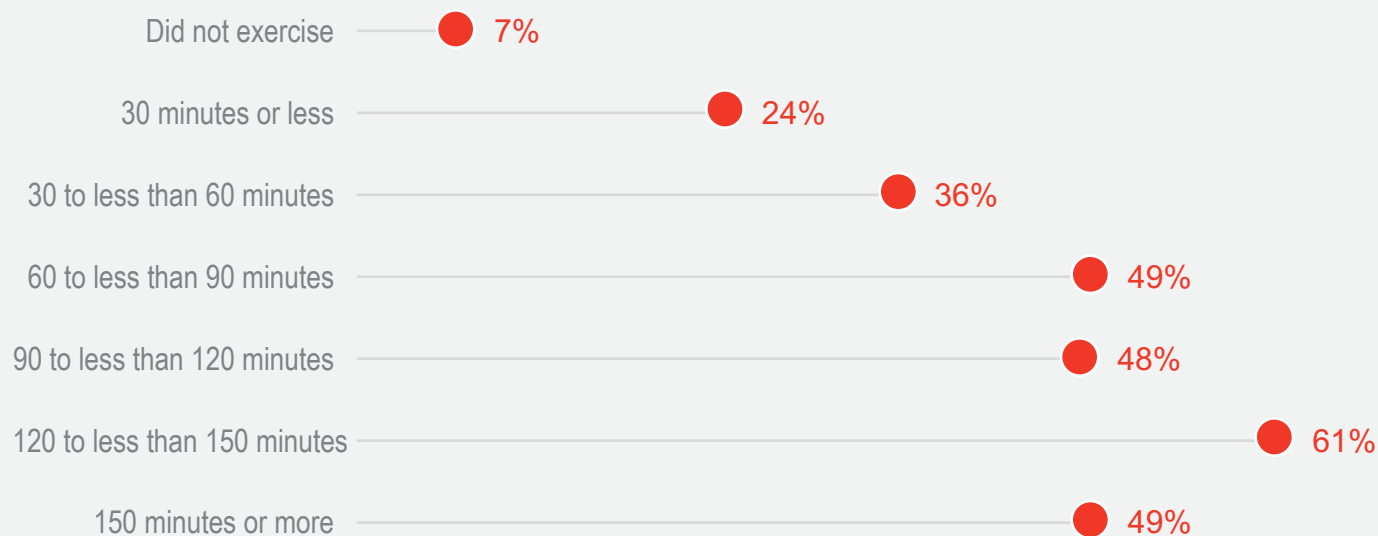
The vast majority of older adults report their level of exercise has either increased (14%) or stayed the same (53%) since the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak. However, one third (32%) report a decrease in their routine physical activity. The effects of the pandemic seem to have a greater effect on those who regularly exercise more than an hour a week. Half or more of those who previously exercised at least 60 minutes a week report a decrease in exercise since COVID-19; with over three in five (61%) older adults who previously exercised between two and two and a half hours reporting they have decreased the amount they exercise since the outbreak.

Change in exercise per week since COVID-19



Percent reporting a decrease in exercise since COVID-19

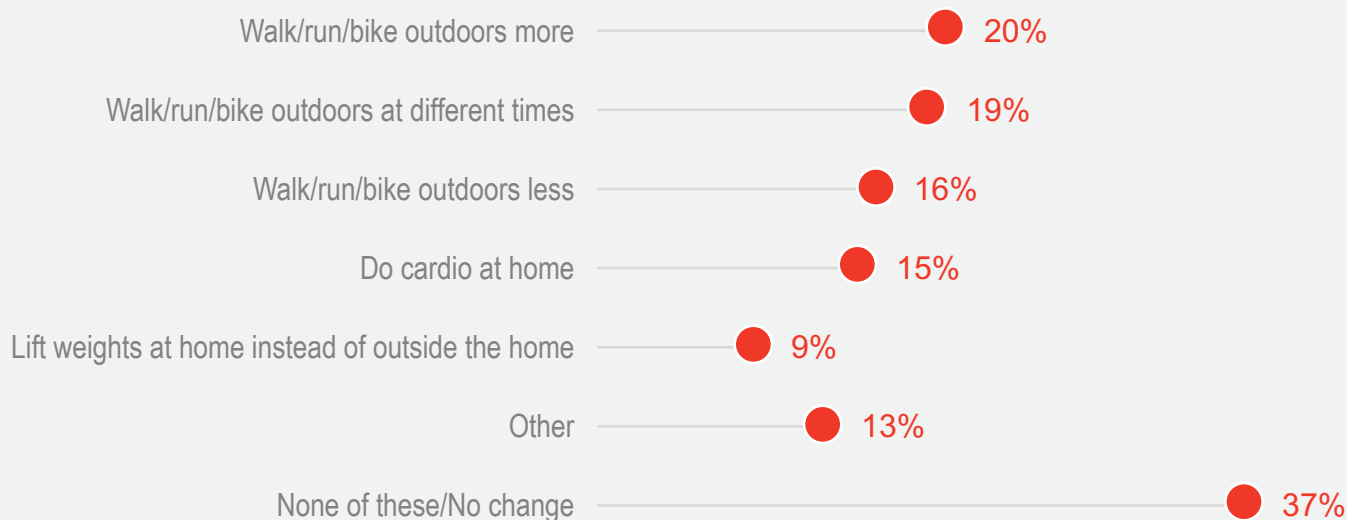
By minutes of exercise per week prior to COVID-19



Cleaner house & yard: How older adults are augmenting exercise while at home.

National stay at home orders have impacted how older adults exercise. While over one third (37%) of older adults report there has been no change in what they do for physical activity, many report they run, bike or walk longer (including walking the dog) (20%). One in five (19%) who run, bike or walk also report differing their timing in an attempt to avoid crowds. Older adults also report they work around the house (inside and outside) more to increase physical activity during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak.

Percent who report doing the following since COVID-19



Other changes in activities since the coronavirus outbreak



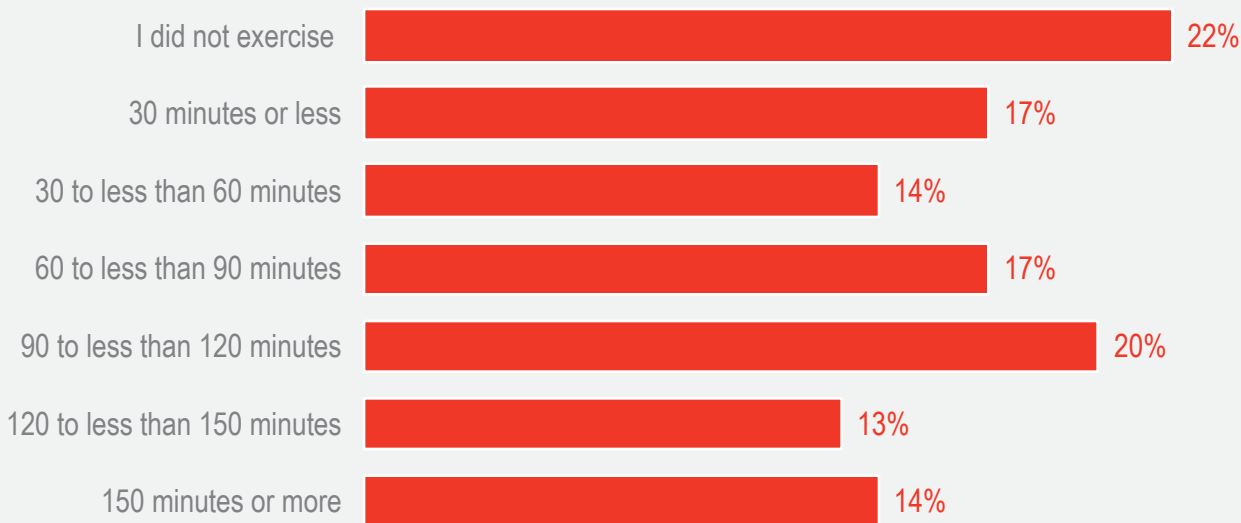


More “home” exercise may translate to lower stress levels.

While few (17%) older adults report high levels of stress (8, 9 or 10 out of 10); those who report not exercising regularly before the coronavirus outbreak (COVID-19) are more likely to say their current stress levels is high (8, 9, or 10 out of 10)—over one in five (22%). Far fewer regular exercisers report high stress levels which may be related to the reported change in activities like increased housecleaning, gardening, yoga, and tai chi in an effort to maintain exercising while staying home.

Percent reporting high current stress level (8, 9 or 10 out of 10)

By minutes of exercise per week prior to COVID-19



Exercisers who have decreased their activity since the pandemic are less likely to report lower stress levels.

Although few older adults report extremely high levels of stress as a result of the pandemic, understandably, most (65%) report their stress level is currently higher than prior to the pandemic. While there is some slight variation in whether current stress levels are higher among exercisers verses non-exercisers; there is no real correlation between the amount of exercise or change in exercise and whether an older person is currently experiencing a higher level of stress than normal for them. About two in five (38%) older adults report extremely low levels of stress (1, 2 or 3 out of 10) during this pandemic.

However, when looking at change in exercise habits generally, those who have either increased or kept their exercise routine the same are more likely to report lower levels of stress than those who have decreased their level of exercise. This is the case even for those who exercise as little as 30 minutes per week. For example, older adults who exercised between an hour to two hours a week prior to the panic and now exercise more are nearly twice as likely to report very low levels of stress compared to their counterparts who now exercise less. Interestingly, over half of those who exercise for two hours or more are more likely to say they have low stress levels even through the current coronavirus pandemic.

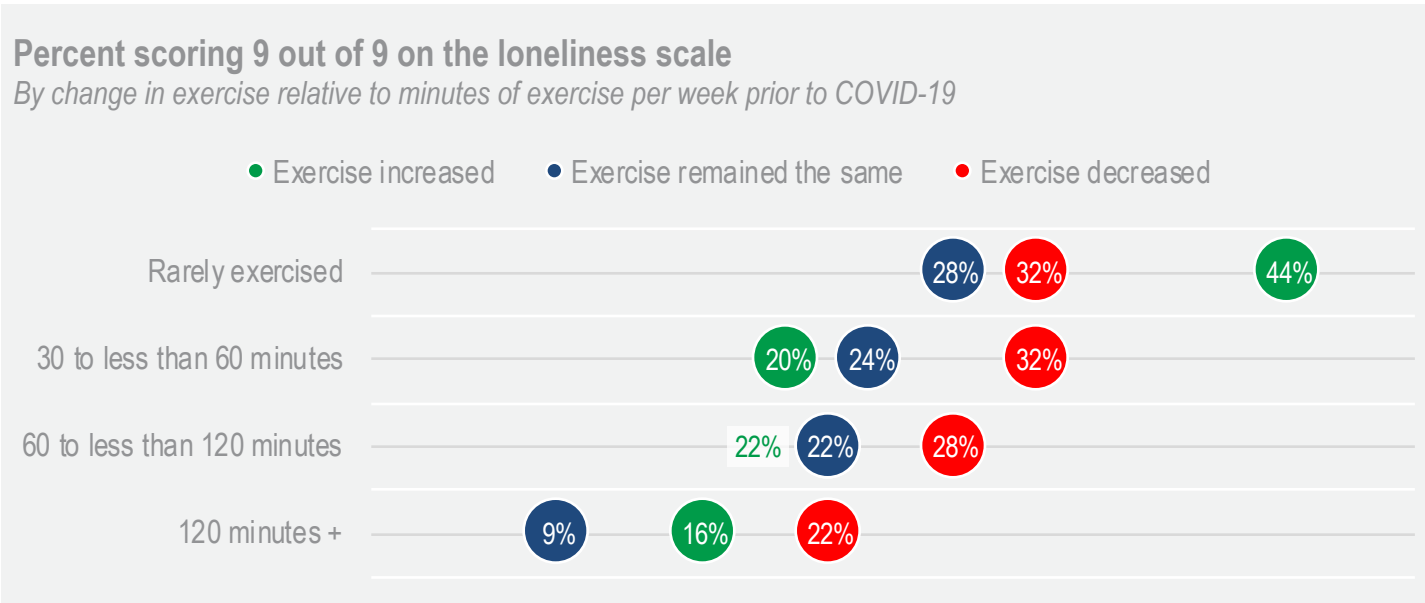
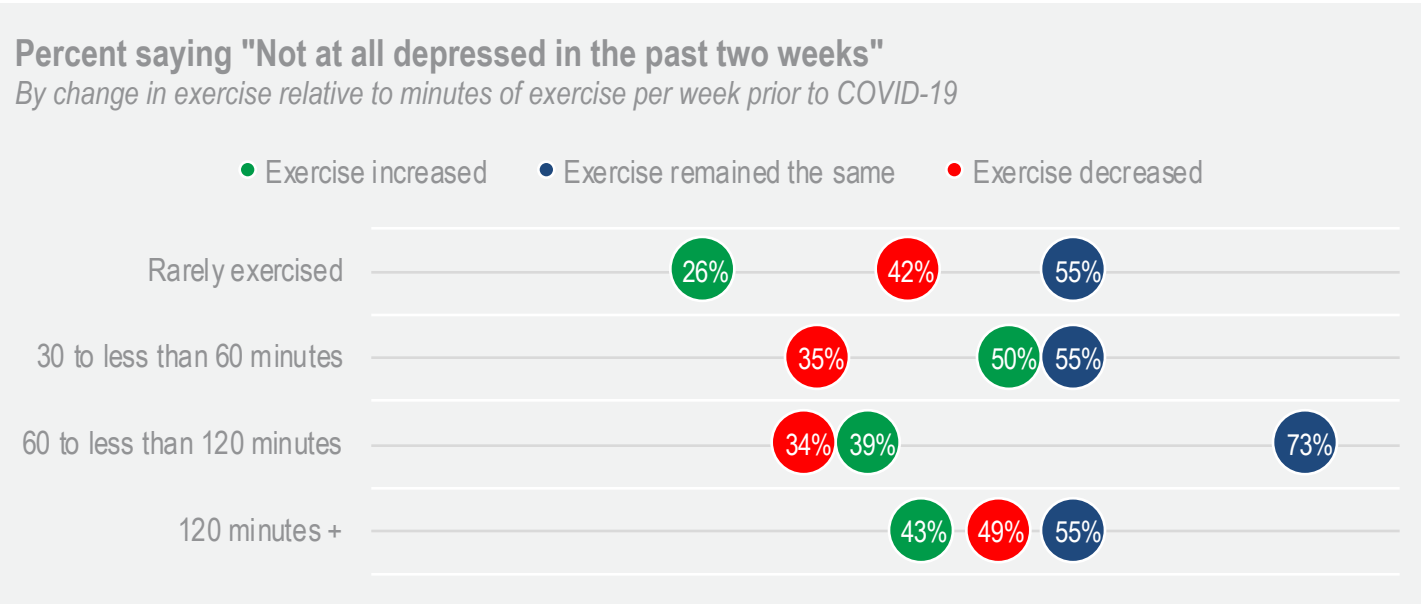
Percent reporting low current stress level (1, 2 or 3 out of 10)
By change in exercise relative to minutes of exercise per week prior to COVID-19




Maintaining an exercise routine may help stave off negative feelings.

Despite the anxiety usually associated with the current pandemic, the vast majority (87%) of older adults report not being bothered at all (50%) by feeling down, depressed, or hopeless in the past two weeks; or only being bothered on one or two days (37%). For the most part, compared to those who recently decreased their exercise routine, those who either increased or maintained their physical activity were more likely to report not being bothered by these negative feelings.

Maintaining an exercise routine may help with feelings of loneliness. As seen with the feeling of hopelessness, the vast majority of older adults say they never (40%) or hardly ever (19%) have feelings of loneliness. This is measured by combining three questions and using a scale from 3 (“hardly ever” experiencing the feeling) to 9 (“often”).¹ Again, we see, compared to those who increased or maintained their physical activity, those who recently decreased their exercise routine are more likely to score high (9 out of 9) on this loneliness scale.



¹Hughes 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



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 exercise plays a vital role in helping older adults relieve stress and related negative feelings. An important point in the findings is regardless exercise level (as measured by minutes of exercise per week), maintaining or increasing the amount of time an older adult exercises is related to lower stress levels and lower negative feelings such as loneliness and depression. This is even the case for those who only exercise 30 minutes per week. While more exercise is always optimal, these results suggest wherever an older person is in their exercise regime, it is important to, at the very least, maintain that same level of activity to help with the stress and anxiety that often accompanies extraordinary time such as the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak.

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 ± 4 percent.



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