The pandemic has created many challenges to maintaining a healthy lifestyle for older adults

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an adverse effect on many different levels, whether they be economic, social or emotional. A recent study by AARP goes one step further and focuses on the pandemic's impact on maintaining a healthy lifestyle for adults ages 50-plus. Overall, among adults ages 50-plus, nearly half (45%) say their ability to maintain a healthy lifestyle over the past year was more difficult. This difficulty in maintaining a healthy lifestyle is consistent across younger and older adults ages 50-plus.

Maintaining a healthy lifestyle over the last year by age

- Harder to maintain a healthy lifestyle last year
- No difference compared to previous years
- Easier to maintain a healthy lifestyle last year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Harder to Maintain</th>
<th>No Difference</th>
<th>Easier to Maintain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total sample</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50 to 59</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60 to 69</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70+</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Even among adults 50-plus who rate their personal health as excellent, three in 10 (29%) say it was harder last year to maintain a healthy lifestyle. This figure doubled to nearly six in 10 (58%) among those who rate their health fair or poor, suggesting that the pandemic’s impact on dietary habits has been wide reaching, especially among those who rate their personal health as fair or poor.

Nearly one-third of those who say their personal health is “excellent” say it was harder to maintain a healthy lifestyle during the height of the pandemic.

**Self rating of health by difficulty in maintaining a healthy lifestyle**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self rating of personal health</th>
<th>Harder to maintain a healthy lifestyle last year</th>
<th>No difference compared to previous years</th>
<th>Easier to maintain a healthy lifestyle last year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Good</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fair or Poor</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
However, some older adults believe they have successfully maintained or even improved their healthy eating habits

One key component of maintaining a healthy lifestyle is diet. Across age groups, about half (48%) of adults ages 50-plus say their eating habits have not changed since the start of the pandemic. Further, one-third (32%) of adults ages 50-plus say they eat a little more or more healthily now than before the pandemic.

“How do I lose weight?... I’ve lost about 15 pounds. I dropped some pant sizes... I’m exercising more. It’s not structured exercise but I’m walking more, I have plans to exercise more. I have plans to get out into nature more. I feel better. I’m volunteering. I’m feeling hopeful in general about society, and that is important to me.”
— H.H., male, 59

“During this pandemic, I gained weight. I think I gained 12 to 15 pounds the first three months and it was just such a wake-up call. I looked at myself in the mirror and you feel it in your clothes. Like I said, it was just nonstop eating. I don’t know why.”
— N.S., female, 62
Looking at diet more closely, self-ratings of eating habits are relative to a person’s perspective. For example, what one person considers a healthy diet another may not. To help control for this, the survey asked each respondent to indicate how many daily servings they had of each of the following food groups: vegetables, grain, protein, dairy and fruit. As highlighted in the chart below, one fifth of adults ages 50-plus say they are eating less healthily today than compared to the start of the pandemic, even among those with the highest consumption of the recommended food group servings.

Calculated diet health by ratings of eating habit change since the pandemic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total sample (all adults ages 50+)</th>
<th>None</th>
<th>One food group</th>
<th>Two food group</th>
<th>Three to four food groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less healthy</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No change</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More healthy</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For those older adults struggling with an increase in the consumption of snacks, time at home, stress and anxiety are the culprits

These results show that there is little relationship between diet (in terms of recommended food group servings) and the perception of eating healthily among adults ages 50-plus. A stronger link may be drawn between the consumption of snacks and the impact of the pandemic.

To help evaluate this relationship, the survey asked how eating habits changed for three less-healthy-food groups: sweet snacks, salty snacks, and highly processed foods. Overall, more than a quarter (29%) of adults ages 50-plus say in the past year they were eating more sweet snacks while a fifth admitted that their diet had changed by eating more salty snacks (20%) and/or highly processed foods (18%). Top reasons cited for eating more snacks and processed foods were spending more time at home (57%) and watching TV/streaming (55%). However, adults aged 50 to 59 were more likely to say they are eating more snacks and processed food because of stress and anxiety than older age groups.

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1 Estimates of daily servings reported were matched to the USDA Food Guidance System, MyPlate recommended daily amounts (by age and gender) and for each food group those who reached the recommended levels received a point; for a maximum of four points.
“My eating habits are totally off. I’m trying to correct them. I’m eating at 10:00 or 11:00 at night. I can’t do that. Usually, I’m having a snack of some walnuts or cashews, but my diet is just all out of whack. I’m trying to reel it in.”

— C.B., male, 52

Those ages 50 to 59 are more likely to say stress is a reason for their change in eating habits over the past year.
Older adults are concerned about dietary shifts and want to make changes; lifestyle choices (dining in vs dining out) will play a big part

Regardless of which factors drive increased consumption, more than half (55%) of these adults ages 50-plus are very concerned about their change in diet and want to make adjustments.

One method to help regain control of one’s diet is understanding how it has changed since the pandemic. For example, more than a third (38%) of adults ages 50-plus say the number of meals they’ve prepared at home has increased since the pandemic. Another quarter (23%) say their use of take-out or delivery has also increased. However, when looking ahead 6 months from when the survey was taken, and at a time when the pandemic was likely to be easing, the anticipated sources of meals shifts. For example, almost half (45%) expect their meals from dine-in/sit down restaurants will increase in the next 6 months while usage of take-out or delivery for more than half (55%) will stay the same. This increase in meals prepared outside the home will likely put more pressure on a healthy diet and, for some, place regaining a healthy diet further out of reach.

“When the pandemic hit and things started closing, one of the things that happened in our household is that I was actually cooking more, so it was healthier. Me and my husband actually lost almost 20 pounds each because we stayed home and weren’t eating out because I was cooking at home more.”

— C.S., female, 59

However, adults ages 50-plus are resilient, and two thirds (67%) of them say they have started or restarted doing an activity to improve their physical, mental, or emotional health since the pandemic. The top three activities included starting to take new vitamin supplements (28%), a change in diet (25%) and starting a new type of exercise (19%).

Awareness of current eating habits is top of mind and the results demonstrate that older adults are motivated to take action and promote their health and well-being.
Implications

Eating habits during the pandemic shifted and for many the intake of snacks and highly processed foods increased. Compounding this trend, many feel they have a healthy diet, but the reality is few actually follow recommended food group servings. That said, the good news from the survey reveals that most of those who have fallen behind on their healthy diet want to change and many have started doing so during the pandemic. One key bright spot from the survey is the commitment to these new activities, especially changes in diet, as the vast majority are intent on maintaining these modifications a year from now.

Regaining control of a healthy diet won’t be easy, especially as access to dine-in/sit down restaurants is expected to increase as the pandemic eases. However, by providing healthy diet tips and prompting self-awareness of current diet habits, regaining control of a healthy diet is within sight for many.

Methodology

The 2021 AARP Healthy Living Survey was conducted online from April 27, 2021 through May 4, 2021 with a total sample of 1903 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 ± 3.34 percent.

The 2021 AARP Healthy Living During the Pandemic Qualitative Study was conducted from April 19 - May 4, 2021 by ANR Marketing Research Consultants. The 20 in-depth interviews (IDIs) were conducted by telephone. Participants were recruited by a national recruiting company and screened to be at least 50 years old and to have a variety of demographic, behavioral, and attitudinal characteristics.

For more information on the survey and methodology please contact: Chery Lampkin, clampkin@aarp.org

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