The background of the entire page is a photograph of three people—two women and one man—practicing Tai Chi outdoors. They are in a similar pose, with arms extended forward and palms facing down. The woman in the foreground is in sharp focus, while the man and another woman behind her are slightly blurred. The background consists of lush green trees and foliage.

MIDLIFE AND OLDER ADULTS' HEALTH: HEALTHY HABITS

MAY 2021

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KEY FINDINGS

Key Findings

- Older adults are dealing with the **coronavirus pandemic in a variety of ways**. One-third of adults 40-plus reported that they are sleeping more, eating more comfort foods, and meditating or praying more. Women and men opt for several different activities, perhaps as a means of managing pandemic stress.
- Given the impact of the pandemic on families, communities, and the country, **it's not surprising that nearly six in 10 adults 40-plus noted they are experiencing difficulties sleeping several days a week**. And, although fewer than half of adults 40-plus reported taking less interest or pleasure in doing things or feeling down, depressed, or hopeless, a sizeable minority reported these feelings more than half of the days in a week.
- **Yet, for the majority of 40-plus, self-reported overall health has remained unchanged over the past two years.**
- **Two-thirds of adults 40-plus said they had engaged in physical activity in past month**, with men, more affluent adults, and those who said they were in top self-reported health reporting higher levels of physical activity.
 - Men and more affluent adults were more likely to have engaged in vigorous exercise; women and less affluent adults were more likely to say they hadn't exercised in the past month.
- **Top barriers to exercise included feeling tired or lacking energy, having health problems, and encountering bad weather.**
 - Women were more likely to cite feeling tired, having no one to exercise with, and fear of getting hurt as barriers to exercise, while men were more likely to mention their work schedule as a barrier.
 - Younger adults were more likely to note being tired, not having enough time, dealing with a challenging work schedule, finding no safe place to exercise, and the expense of exercising as barriers. In contrast, older adults cited health problems and fears of getting hurt as barriers to exercise.

DETAILED FINDINGS

Older adults reported coping with pandemic stress in a variety of ways.

Percent doing the following activities **more** or **less** compared to before the coronavirus pandemic

Percentage point difference in parentheses

In terms of positive behaviors, on balance, adults 40 and older are meditating or praying more now than before the coronavirus pandemic. Yet, they are also sleeping or napping, eating comfort and unhealthy foods, and taking herbal supplements more now, too. And they are exercising or walking and socializing with friend, family, or community members less now than before the pandemic.

Older adults have been engaging less often in unhealthy behaviors — overreacting, drinking alcohol, using CBD oils or marijuana, smoking cigarettes, and taking prescriptions in off-label ways — now than before the pandemic.

Q16. Compared to before the coronavirus pandemic, do you now do more, less, or the same amount of the following activities?

Base: All respondents (n=1,505)

Women and men opted for several different activities, perhaps as a means of managing pandemic stress.

Percent doing more of the following compared to before the coronavirus pandemic
By gender

Q16. Compared to before the coronavirus pandemic, do you now do more, less, or the same amount of the following activities? Base: All respondents (n=1,505)

Sleep difficulties regularly affected a majority of adults 40-plus.

Frequency of experiencing the following problems over the past two weeks

Q22. Over the last two weeks, how often have you been bothered by any of the following problems? Would you say not at all, several days, more than half the days, or nearly every day?
Base: All respondents (n=1,505)

Women were more likely than men to experience problems sleeping or feeling down.

Frequency of experiencing the following problems over the past two weeks
By gender

Q22. Over the last two weeks, how often have you been bothered by any of the following problems? Would you say not at all, several days, more than half the days, or nearly every day?
Base: All respondents (n=1,505)

Yet, for a majority of older adults, overall health remained unchanged.

Change in overall health over the past two years
Total, by gender, and by age

Q3. Over the past two years, would you say your **overall health** has gotten better, stayed the same, or gotten worse?
Base: All respondents (n=1,505)

Two-thirds of adults 40-plus had engaged in physical activity in the past month, with notable differences by gender, household income, and health status.

Percent engaging in exercise during the past month outside of their regular job

By **gender**, **household income**, and **overall health**

Q17. During the past month, other than your regular job, did you participate in any physical activities or exercises such as running, calisthenics, golf, gardening, or walking for exercise? Q18. How would you describe the level of exercise you typically engage in?

Men and more affluent adults were more likely to say they had engaged in vigorous exercise in the past month, while women and less affluent adults were more likely to say they hadn't exercised.

Level of exercise during the past month outside of their regular job
Total, by gender, and by household income

Q17. During the past month, other than your regular job, did you participate in any physical activities or exercises such as running, calisthenics, golf, gardening, or walking for exercise? Q18. How would you describe the level of exercise you typically engage in? Base: All respondents (n=1,505)

Adults 40-plus cited being tired or lacking energy, health problems, and bad weather as the top barriers to exercise.

Reasons for not exercising

Younger adults cited being tired, not having enough time, a challenging work schedule, no safe place, and cost as barriers to exercise, while older adults cited health problems and fears of getting hurt.

Barriers to exercise
By age

Q19. What things interfere with your ability to exercise? Base: All respondents (n=1,505)

IMPLICATIONS

Implications

Results from our survey highlight the myriad ways in which U.S. adults 40 and older have been facing the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Given all that has occurred within families, communities, and the country since the pandemic began, it is not surprising that midlife and older adults have been dealing with it in different ways—some sleeping and eating more, others sleeping less and perhaps engaging in more unhealthy behaviors. With a vaccine for COVID-19 widely available in the U.S., now may be the time for all of us to carefully plan for our post-pandemic lives.

- Wear a mask.
- Continue to practice social distancing.
- Avoid mid-size and large in-person gatherings.
- Get tested if you have COVID-19 symptoms or if believe you've been exposed to someone else who has them.
- Check with trusted information sources and make the best choice for yourself and your family about getting the vaccine.
- And, at the same time, adopt (or re-adopt) behaviors that will help you to improve your overall health and mental well-being.

METHODOLOGY

Objectives and Methodology

Objective: To learn more about midlife and older adults' health status and health conditions, insurance and health care coverage, and access to health professionals as well as health concerns and screenings, health habits (including exercise), and concern about COVID-19.

Methodology: Phone, nationally representative survey.

Sample: U.S. adults age 40 and older; n=1,505.

(601 via landline telephones and 904 via cell phones)

Interviewing Dates: November 10–20, 2020.

Language: Interviews conducted in English.

Weighting: Data were weighted by age, gender, race/ethnicity, education, and Census division according to 2017 5-year U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey (ACS) estimates.

Questionnaire length: 25 minutes (median).

Confidence Intervals: $\pm 2.5\%$.

The margin of error among subgroups is higher.

Note: Some percentages may not equal 100% due to rounding or the use of multiple response question formats.

About AARP

AARP is the nation's largest nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to empowering Americans 50 and older to choose how they live as they age. With nearly 38 million members and offices in every state, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands, AARP works to strengthen communities and advocate for what matters most to families with a focus on health security, financial stability and personal fulfillment. AARP also works for individuals in the marketplace by sparking new solutions and allowing carefully chosen, high-quality products and services to carry the AARP name. As a trusted source for news and information, AARP produces the nation's largest circulation publications, AARP The Magazine and AARP Bulletin. To learn more, visit www.aarp.org or follow @AARP and @AARPadvocates on social media.

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