HEALTHY LIVING DURING THE PANDEMIC AND BEYOND: AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITIES

Regaining control of a healthy lifestyle through diet

An AARP Healthy Living Survey of Adults Ages 50 and Older

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. The AARP 2021 Healthy Living Survey focuses on the pandemic's effect on maintaining a healthy lifestyle for African American adults ages 50-plus. Over four in ten (46%) African American adults ages 50-plus, say over the past year—that is, during the height of the pandemic—it was more difficult to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Older adults ages 60-plus were more likely than those ages 50 to 59 to say it was harder to maintain a healthy lifestyle last year (50% vs. 39%).

Maintaining a healthy lifestyle over the last year by age group

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

Even among adults 50-plus who rate their personal health as excellent, nearly two in 10 (18%) say it was harder to maintain a healthy lifestyle last year. This figure more than doubles to nearly half (47%) among those who rate their health fair or poor, suggesting the pandemic's impact on dietary habits has been wide reaching, especially among those who rate their personal health lower.

Those who rate their health as poor are significantly more likely to 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

“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

However, some older African American adults believe they have successfully maintained or even improved their healthy eating habits

One vital component of maintaining a healthy lifestyle is diet. Most (68%) African American adults ages 50-plus say their eating habits have not changed since the start of the pandemic. And a quarter (24%) say they have a more healthy diet now than before the pandemic.

Looking at diet more closely, as one might expect, 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 explore this more, 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.¹ As highlighted in the chart below, while only one in 10 (11%) African American adults ages 50-plus say they are eating a less healthy diet today than compared to the start of the pandemic, two in 10 (21%) African American older adults say they do not eat the recommended daily servings of the tested food groups. Furthermore, about one in six (16%) who say they are eating healthier do not eat the recommended daily servings of the tested food groups. So while most say they have maintained or even improved on their diet during the pandemic, most do not consume the recommended amount of vegetables, grain, protein, dairy and fruit.

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.

Change in eating habits since the pandemic by number of recommended daily food group servings achieved on average

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

As has been demonstrated, there seems to be little relationship between diet (in terms of recommended food group servings) and the perception of eating healthily among African American 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 (27%) of African American adults ages 50-plus say in the past year they were eating more sweet snacks while about 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 (50%) and watching TV/streaming (49%). Additionally, many say their dietary habits changed during the pandemic because they were bored (37%) and stressed (30%).

Staying home more and watching TV tops reasons why some say they are eating more snacks and high processed foods.

Reasons for eating more snacks and processed foods

n=161 (eating more snacks and processed foods since start of pandemic)

How do you feel about the fact that you are eating more snacks and processed foods?

15%

I think it's fine

26%

I am a little concerned, but probably won't change

59%

I am very concerned, and would like to change

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 increased consumption of snacks and processed foods, six in 10 (59%) say they 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 in terms of where older adults get their meals. For example, about four in 10 (42%) African American adults ages 50-plus say the number of meals they've prepared at home has increased since the pandemic and over one-third (36%) say the number of meals prepared at home will increase over the next six months. Preparing meals at home is one way older adults may be able to have more control over what and how much they eat—helping them regain control of a healthy lifestyle.

However, when looking ahead six 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, a quarter (26%) expect the number of meals from dine-in/sit down restaurants will increase and one in 10 expect their meals from take-out or delivery (9%) and/or fast food (9%) will increase. This increase in meals prepared outside the home will likely put more pressure on a healthy diet and, for some, make it more challenging to sustain a healthy eating routine.

Percentage increase versus before the pandemic

Looking ahead to six months from now

African American adults ages 50-plus are resilient, focused and determined with the majority saying they have started doing something to improve their health since the pandemic.

Even though getting out more may produce potential challenges to regaining a healthy lifestyle through diet, many African American adults ages 50-plus are resilient, focused and determined with three-quarters (76%) saying they have started or restarted doing at least one activity to improve their physical, mental, or emotional health since the pandemic. And one-third (33%) say they have started two (21%) or three (12%) new activities to improve their health. Moreover, the vast majority (80% or more) say it is likely they will be doing these new activities a year from now. The top three activities cited related to working towards an improved physical health are change in diet (48%), starting to take new vitamins/supplements (44%), and starting a new type of exercise (30%).

“Eating healthier....So I've lost about 15 pounds. I dropped some pant sizes.

I am pre-diabetic so my A1c has dropped.... 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 have and I'm continuing to get out in nature more . . . I feel better. ”

— H.H., Male, 59

Top new activities employed since the pandemic to improve health:

48%

Change in diet

44%

Take new vitamins/
supplements

30%

Starting new type
of exercise

Implications

Eating habits during the pandemic shifted and for many African American adults ages 50-plus, the intake of snacks and highly processed foods increased. Compounding this trend, while many feel they have a healthy diet, the reality is few actually follow daily recommended food group servings of vegetables, grain, protein, dairy and fruit. That said, the good news is most African American older adults who have fallen behind on their healthy diet as a result of the pandemic want to change and most have already taken steps to regain their healthy lifestyle. One promising insight is the near universal commitment to maintaining 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 including an oversample of 462 African Americans. 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 African American sample is ± 5.85 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:

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