HEALTHY LIVING DURING THE PANDEMIC AND BEYOND: HISPANIC/LATINO 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 Hispanic/Latino adults ages 50-plus. Nearly half (47%) of Hispanic/Latino 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. Those ages 60 and older were no more likely than those age 50 to 59 to say it was harder to maintain a healthy lifestyle last year. In fact, for the two age groups, nearly equal portions (about half) say there really was no difference compared to previous years.

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

A very small percentage (3%) of the Hispanic/Latino 50-plus population rate their health as excellent. Of those, less than one in 10 (8%), say it was harder to maintain a healthy lifestyle last year. However, for everyone else, four in 10 or more (between 42% and 55%) say it was harder maintaining a healthy lifestyle last year, suggesting the pandemic’s impact on dietary habits has been wide reaching for this population.

The vast majority of the 50-plus Hispanic/Latino population say it was hard to maintain a healthy lifestyle during the height of the pandemic.

Ease of maintaining healthy lifestyle by self reported health

However, some older Hispanic/Latino adults believe they have successfully maintained or even improved their healthy eating habits

One vital component of maintaining a healthy lifestyle is diet. Most (66%) Hispanic/Latino adults ages 50-plus say their eating habits have not changed much since the start of the pandemic. And two in 10 (22%) 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 7 (13%) Hispanic/Latino adults ages 50-plus say they are eating a less healthy diet today than compared to the start of the pandemic, a quarter (26%) of Hispanic/Latino 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.

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 Hispanic/Latino adults ages 50-plus. A stronger link may be drawn between the consumption of snacks and the impact of the pandemic.

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.

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, nearly a third (31%) of the Hispanic/Latino adults ages 50-plus say that in the past year they were eating more sweet snacks while a quarter (25%) say their diet had changed by eating more salty snacks. Additionally, two in 10 (20%) say they have increased their consumption of highly processed foods like pizza, hot dogs and sandwich meats. Top reasons cited for eating more snacks and processed foods were spending more time at home (51%) and watching TV/streaming (48%). Additionally, many say their dietary habits changed during the pandemic because they were stressed (38%) and bored (33%).

Staying home more, doing more sitting 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=177 (eating more snacks and processed foods since start of pandemic)

“My thing is, I got to the point where I got restless and I couldn’t sleep at night. When you are up half the night you get hungry. Instead of me just going to sleep, even though I would try to go to sleep, I would just start eating snacks ”

— N.S., Female, 62

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

20%

I think it's fine

19%

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

62%

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, over six in 10 (62%) 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, over four in 10 (45%) Hispanic/Latino adults ages 50-plus say the number of meals they've prepared at home has increased since the pandemic and three in 10 (29%) 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, nearly four in 10 (37%) expect the number of meals from dine-in/sit down restaurants will increase and nearly one in 10 (8%) expect their meals from take-out or delivery will increase. This increase in meals prepared outside the home will likely put more pressure on a healthy diet and, for some, making it more challenging to sustain a healthy eating routine.

Percentage increase versus before the pandemic

Looking ahead to six months from now

Hispanic/Latino 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 Hispanic/Latino adults ages 50-plus are resilient, focused and determined with over six in 10 (65%) saying they have started or restarted doing at least one activity to improve their physical, mental, or emotional health since the pandemic. Additionally, three in 10 (31%) say they have started two (18%) or three (13%) new activities to improve their health. Moreover, the vast majority (75% or more) say it is likely they will be doing these new activities a year from now. The top three activities related to working towards an improved physical health cited are starting to take new vitamins/supplements (41%), change in diet (39%), and starting a new type of exercise (31%).

“I actually got into a healthy regimen and exercising, so actually I’ve been exercising every day for the past six months, like 20 to 30 minutes a day, and I usually do it by video either – mostly on YouTube, so I found something I like. ”

— R.E., Female, 63

Top new activities employed since the pandemic to improve health:

41%

Take new vitamins/
supplements

39%

Change in diet

31%

Starting new type
of exercise

Implications

Eating habits during the pandemic shifted and for many Hispanic/Latino 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 Hispanic/Latino 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 446 Hispanic/Latinos. 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 Hispanic/Latino sample is ± 9.60 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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