HEALTHY LIVING DURING THE PANDEMIC AND BEYOND:

Regaining control of a healthy lifestyle through exercise

An AARP Healthy Living Survey of Adults Ages 50 and Older

The pandemic has created many challenges to maintaining an active lifestyle for older adults

Second in its series on how the pandemic has impacted older adults' ability to maintain a healthy lifestyle, this spotlight focuses on exercise and physical activity. The AARP Healthy Living Survey found that nearly half (47%) of adults ages 50-plus say their ability to maintain a healthy lifestyle over the past year - during the height of the pandemic - was more difficult. Clearly, for those who have found it more difficult to maintain a healthy lifestyle, a decline in exercise appears to have been a contributing factor with more than a third (37%) saying the time devoted to exercise has diminished compared to pre-pandemic times. Even among those who say maintaining a healthy lifestyle over the past year was easier, nearly two in 10 (18%) say their exercise time has decreased. These results highlight the challenges the pandemic has created for exercise among adults ages 50-plus and the important role that exercise plays in a healthy lifestyle.

Pre-pandemic time spent exercising vs typical week in the past 30 days

■ Decreased
 ■ Stayed the same
 ■ Increase

More broadly, when adults ages 50-plus were asked “What are some ways in which you would like to make improvements in your health?” nearly two-thirds (61%) selected getting regular exercise, a close second to losing weight (64%). Getting regular exercise is pretty much a universal desire for those ages 50-plus as it was consistently ranked a close second across age groups. For example, nearly two-thirds of both 50 to 59 (64%) and 60 to 69 (64%) year-olds and over half (56%) of adults ages 70-plus selected exercise as an activity to improve their health.

Top 2 ways adults ages 50-plus would like to make improvements to their health by age group

For those who say that their “health felt more out of control last year” getting regular exercise is even more important. For example, nearly three out of four (70%) adults ages 50-plus who felt that their health got out of control last year ranked getting regular exercise highest as a way to make improvements to their health. This compares to only about half (55%) of those who felt in control of their health last year. However, there is little difference between groups when it comes to wanting to lose weight to improve their health. Two thirds (66%) of the who say their “health felt more out of control last year” say they want to lose weight to improve their health. Similarly, over six in 10 (63%) of those who felt in control say they want to lose weight.

What are some ways in which you would like to make improvements in your health?

■ Health felt out of control last year

■ Health did not feel out of control last year

The pandemic has motivated many to make a change to improve their health

The pandemic has inspired a majority of adults ages 50-plus to take on new activities to improve their health. For example, in the past year, two thirds (67%) of older adults started or restarted activities to improve their physical, mental or emotional health. Topping the list of activities included starting or re-starting a new vitamins/supplements plan (28%), implementing a change in diet (25%) and trying a new type of exercise (19%). Additionally, nearly one in ten (7%) adults ages 50-plus had tried an online exercise class; though women (10%) are far more likely to have tried an online exercise class than men (4%).

New activities started or re-started since the coronavirus outbreak

Many of these new activities have staying power. For example, for those who started or restarted a new diet or a new type of exercise, a sizable proportion say they are very likely to be engaged in these activities a year from now (55% and 45% very likely, respectively). That said, the staying power of online exercise classes ranked the lowest, with only one-in-five (22%) saying they are very likely to continue a year from now. One driver of lower intent to continue online exercise classes, at least in the short term, is improving weather and the increase in opportunities to spend time outdoors.

Older adults are determined to overcome pandemic-related barriers to exercising

Eight-in-ten (83%) adults ages 50-plus report they are currently exercising on a weekly basis. Those who are exercising report getting an average of 1.5 hours of exercise per week. Compared to when the coronavirus outbreak first began (around March 2020), one-quarter (24%) of adults ages 50-plus say their exercise time has decreased illustrating that the pandemic has gotten in the way of regular exercising for some. One challenge was just getting out of the house. For example, compared to 6 months ago, about a quarter (24%) report that the number of times they left their home in a typical week to shop, run errands, exercise, visit friends or family, or dine out had declined. This suggests, as older adults begin to feel more comfortable with leaving their home, exercise, especially physical activity outdoors, may increase.

On the bright side, looking ahead to the next 6 months, adults ages 50-plus are more optimistic about increasing their exercise time. Overall, more than four in 10 (45%) say their exercise time will increase in the next 6 months while few (3%) expect their exercise time will decrease. Key factors supporting an increase in exercise time include better weather (63%), the ability to go to parks/open areas (40%) and less concern about COVID-19 (36%). While over a third of older adults who plan to increase the time spent exercising say it is because they will be less concerned about catching COVID-19, this was more so the case for adults ages 70-plus. About half (48%) of adults ages 70-plus say their exercise time will increase because they won't be concerned about catching COVID compared to about a third (37%) among 60 to 69-year-olds and a quarter (26%) of those ages 50 to 59. So, while there were a number of barriers to exercise for older adults this suggests a fear of catching COVID-19 impacted physical activity especially for the older age group.

Other results show that a sizable proportion of those with little or no exercise in the last 30 days expect to increase their activity levels in the next 6 months. For example, more than a third (44%) of adults ages 50-plus who had not engaged in any physical activity in the last 30 days plan to increase their minutes of exercise in the next 6 months. And for those who engage in light activity (e.g. under 150 minutes a week) more than half (55%) expect to increase their number of minutes in the next 6 months.

Expected exercise activity six months from now

Many older adults see exercise as a way to reduce pandemic-related stress

More than a third (43%) of adults ages 50-plus report that their stress levels have increased since the pandemic. However, looking 6 months ahead, one-third (34%) see their stress levels declining. Although there are many factors contributing to the anticipated decline in future stress levels (e.g. increase social contact, vaccination rates, etc.) exercise is a key driver. For example, nearly half (47%) of those who see their stress levels declining in the next 6 months say better weather and the ability to exercise outside is a factor and nearly one in five (17%) say being able to go back to the gym will help them reduce stress.

Why stress levels will decrease in next 6 months

Implications

In many respects the impact of the pandemic on adults ages 50-plus is clear. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, nearly half (45%) of adults ages 50-plus felt that their health was out of control, a quarter (24%) left their house less often and four in 10 (43%) reported higher levels of stress. What is also clear is that the pandemic limited access to exercise, a key way to maintain a healthy lifestyle including the ability to cope with stress.

Looking ahead, the outlook of adults ages 50-plus is optimistic with many predicting an increase in exercise time and a reduction in stress over the next 6 months. However, at least some of this expectation is based on a COVID-free life. This expectation needs to be balanced with the likely reality that the virus is not going to completely disappear anytime soon and that some barriers to physical activity are likely to remain. In this evolving reality, positioning physical activity to help maintain a healthy lifestyle needs to stress flexibility and an open mind. Adults ages 50-plus will benefit by exploring new types of exercise, more flexible routines (e.g. time of day, indoors and outside) and experimenting with online exercise classes.

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:

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