HEALTHY LIVING DURING THE PANDEMIC AND BEYOND: AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITIES

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 among African American adults ages 50-plus. The AARP Healthy Living Survey found that over four in ten (46%) African American 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. 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 nearly a third (30%) 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 a third (30%) say their exercise time has decreased. These results highlight the challenges the pandemic has created for exercise among African American adults ages 50-plus and the connection between exercise and the ability to maintain a healthy lifestyle.

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

■ Decreased
 ■ Stayed the same
 ■ Increased

“Really the only physical activity I have has been with the dog . . . I did (used to do) a lot of team things, so that basically disappeared. So both the physical activity as well as the mental stimulation of that with playing competitively with teams and coaching kids, that was the challenge. That was a big change. There was a lot of isolation for several months.”

— Gordon, Male, 61

African American adults ages 50-plus were asked whether they agree or disagree with the following statement: “My health felt more out of control last year (March 2020 to March 2021).” Over four in 10 (45%) say they felt their health felt out of control. Looking into this sentiment further, nearly three in 10 (28%) of those who say their health was out of control also say the amount of time exercising decreased. Again, even among those who do not feel their health was out of control, a quarter (25%) say the amount of time spent exercising decreased since the start of the pandemic.

Exercise change by whether health has been out of control since the pandemic

■ Decreased ■ Stayed the same ■ Increased

45%
say their health
was out of control
last year

For those who want to reestablish a healthy lifestyle, most say getting regular exercise is key

Although less than half of the African American older adult population say they have a less than optimal healthy lifestyle, most say they would like to make improvements in their health through weight loss (63%), diet (62%) and exercise (61%). For those who say their “health felt more out of control last year,” getting regular exercise is even more important. For example, more than two-thirds (67%) of African American adults ages 50-plus who say their health got out of control last year ranked getting regular exercise as a way in which they want to improve their health. This compares to only a little more than half (56%) of those who felt in control of their health last year. Still, even for those who felt in control of their health, getting regular exercise remains one of the top three goals to improve health.

Ways I would like to make improvement in my health

Top ranked ways want to improve health

Many have put their goals to improve their health into action by incorporating new activities, including a new exercise regime

The pandemic has inspired a majority of African American adults ages 50-plus to take on new activities to improve their health. For example, three-quarters (76%) say 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. 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%). Additionally, over one in 10 (13%) say they also tried an online exercise class.

New physical health-related activities started or re-started since the coronavirus outbreak

The majority say they have started or restarted doing at least one activity to improve their physical, mental, or emotional health since the pandemic.

The promising news is, for most, these new activities have staying power. The vast majority of those who started or restarted an activity say they are likely to be engaged in the following a year from now: a new diet (91%), new vitamin/supplement regime (90%), new exercise (92%). Fewer, but still the majority (84%) of those who started a new online exercise class say they are likely to still be in an online exercise class a year from now. One driver of lower intent to continue online exercise classes, at least in the short term, is most likely related to an expected increase in opportunities to spend time outdoors with exercise buddies and attend in-person venues like gyms.

Likelihood will be doing new activity a year from now (very or somewhat likely):

91%

Change in diet
(n=162)

90%

Take new vitamins/
supplements
(n=149)

92%

Tried new type
of exercise
(n=102)

84%

Tried an online
exercise class
(n=43)

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

Eight-in-ten (79%) African American adults ages 50-plus report they are currently exercising on a weekly basis with about three in 10 (28%) reporting they exercise 30 minutes or less a week, a third (35%) reporting they currently exercise between 30 and 119 minutes per week and one in six (16%) reporting they currently exercise at least 120 minutes per week. Compared to when the coronavirus outbreak first began (around March 2020), one-quarter (26%) of African American 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, the majority of older adults ages 50-plus reported that during the height of the pandemic 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.¹ This suggests, as older adults begin to feel more comfortable with leaving their home, time spent exercising, especially physical activity outdoors, may increase.

Exercise activity since coronavirus outbreak

Expected exercise activity in the next 6 months

¹ See Lampkin, Cheryl. 2020 Healthy Living During Extraordinary Times. Washington, DC: AARP Research, June 2020. <https://doi.org/10.26419/res.00386.001>.

Encouragingly, when looking ahead 6 months from when the survey was conducted, African American adults ages 50-plus say they are optimistic about increasing their exercise time. Regardless of how much they currently exercise, half (49%) say their exercise time will increase in the next 6 months while few (6%) expect their exercise time will decrease. Key factors supporting an increase in exercise time include better weather² (60%), the ability to go to parks/open areas (54%) and an expectation of being able to go to a gym (36%). The last factor, attending a gym, suggests an anticipated decreased concern about catching COVID-19. This thought is supported by a third (33%) who say their exercise time in general will increase in the next 6 months because they will be less concerned about catching COVID-19.

Many who do not currently exercise regularly expect to increase their activity levels in the next 6 months and to continue their new routine over the coming year.

Results also 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, a quarter (24%) of the African American 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. Similarly, over a third (between 36% and 38%) of those who engage in a limited number of minutes exercising per week (less than an hour), plan to increase the number of minutes they exercise in a typical week. Interestingly, nearly half (47%) of those who currently exercise 120 minutes or more in a typical week, plan to increase the amount of time they exercise as well.

Current number of minutes exercising in a typical week, by expected change in 6 months

² Survey conducted in April/May 2021

Plans to gain control through increased exercise exemplified by a high likelihood of maintenance through the pandemic and beyond

Those who say they currently exercise at least 30 minutes a week and/or expect the number of minutes spent exercising to increase over the next 6 months (approximately 90% of the African American 50-plus population falls within these categories) were asked about the likelihood they will maintain the new exercise regime after the pandemic has subsided. By far, the vast majority (93%) say they expect to keep up their current or enhanced exercise routine through the pandemic and beyond. Even among those who currently do not exercise (but expect to within 6 months), the majority (83%) say it is likely they will continue to exercise after the pandemic. As might be expected, those who currently exercise more than an hour a week anticipate they will continue to exercise after the pandemic is over.

Current number of minutes exercising in a typical week, by percent likely to keep existing or new exercise routine after pandemic – (very or somewhat likely)

Implications

In many respects, the impact of the pandemic on African American adults ages 50-plus is clear. Nearly half (46%) of African American 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 and they felt their health was out of control (45%). One key factor in the inability to control one's health is related to a decrease in time spent exercising. Even among those who did not feel as if their health was out of control, a quarter (25%) say the amount of time they spend exercising has decreased compared to before the pandemic.

Although the pandemic negatively affected the ability to maintain a healthy lifestyle, especially in the area of routine physical activity, the vast majority of African American older adults say they are regaining control of their health through exercise and plan to continue regaining control throughout the pandemic and beyond. Indeed, when asked to look ahead 6 months, most African American adults ages 50-plus are optimistic with many predicting an increase in time spent exercising. 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 to remain safe, 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. African American 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/videos.

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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