HEALTHY LIVING DURING THE PANDEMIC AND BEYOND: DIFFERENCES BY GENDER

Gender-based factors influencing a healthy lifestyle

An AARP Healthy Living Survey of Adults Ages 50 and Older

The toll of the pandemic has been harder on women than men

Third in the series on how the pandemic has impacted adults' ages 50-plus ability to maintain a healthy lifestyle, this spotlight focuses the differences between women and men.

The AARP Healthy Living Survey found that women have perceived their health to be more impacted by the pandemic than men. For example, half (52%) of women surveyed saying “my health has felt more out of control in the last year (March 2020 through March 2021)” compared to just over one-third (36%) of men. For many women this put a healthy lifestyle out of reach with half of women (52%) also saying it was “harder to maintain a healthy lifestyle” over the past year compared to previous years. Less than half (47%) of men agree with the statement. When it comes to stress levels as a result of the pandemic, nearly half (47%) of women report high stress compared to little more than a third (38%) of men.

Impact of the pandemic by gender

■ Women ■ Men

“I [was] anxious because I really couldn’t go anywhere [so I was] in the house all the time.”

— L.G., female, 67

Eating habits of women more affected by the pandemic

One key factor affecting a healthy lifestyle is diet, and women ages 50-plus report a greater impact to their eating habits during the pandemic. Six in 10 women say that, compared to pre-pandemic times, they are now eating more sweet snacks (62%), salty snacks (60%), and highly processed foods (i.e. pizza, sandwich meats etc.) (60%). By comparison, men ages 50-plus are significantly less likely to say they are eating more of these foods: 38%, 40% and 40%, respectively.

Eating more snacks/highly processed foods

Anxiety and boredom drove women to eat more snacks and highly processed foods

When we delve further into the reasons behind this change in diet, for women, more than a third (37%) say it is related to stress and over a quarter (28%) say it is due to anxiety. In contrast, for men, only about a quarter (28%) say stress affected their eating habits and less than one-fifth (16%) say anxiety played a role in their increased snacking. Further, one-quarter of women (26%) attribute their diet change to “not doing anything” (with their activities limited due to the pandemic), while one-fifth (18%) of men cite this as a reason.

Reasons for eating more snacks/highly processed foods

Women are more motivated to take control and make a change

Even with this greater perceived downturn in healthy habits, women ages 50-plus are more likely than their male counterparts to do something to regain their healthy lifestyles. Across a spectrum of activities to improve physical, mental, or emotional health since the coronavirus outbreak began, older adult women outpace older adult men in starting new vitamins/supplements (32% vs 23%), learning a new skill or taking up a new hobby (18% vs 11%) and trying an online exercise class (10% vs 4%). Overall, three-quarters (74%) of women report taking up any new or re-started activity, compared to just under six in 10 (58%) men. This level of motivation for women continues when looking to the future, with half (50%) of women anticipating that their minutes of exercising in a typical week will increase, compared to a little over a third (38%) for men. This difference in the short to medium-term is an important one, as both women and men report spending similar amounts of time exercising on a weekly basis (e.g., 81% of women and 85% of men say they currently exercise for at least 30 minutes per week) and demonstrates a higher level of motivation among women to exercise.

Change in time spent exercising six months from now

Women are more likely to make healthy lifestyle choices

As the pandemic continues and people adjust to living with COVID-19, adult women ages 50-plus are clearly more driven to make healthy improvements to their lifestyle than men ages 50-plus. For example, nearly seven in 10 (68%) women say they would like to lose weight compared to six in 10 (59%) men. Beyond weight control, women are more keen on managing their stress with 40 percent citing it as an area for improvement, in contrast to only 28 percent of men. Since women are more likely to report higher stress levels as a result of the pandemic, it correlates that when looking ahead, more women than men anticipate that their stress levels will decrease 6 months from now (39% vs. 28%).

Preferred ways to make improvements to health

Women are venturing out of the home more, but still remain cautious

Women ages 50-plus also appear to be readjusting faster than men ages 50-plus in increasing their time out of the home. One-third (32%) of older adult women say the number of times they've left home in a typical week has increased over recent weeks, while less than one-quarter (23%) of older adult men concur. However, even with their willingness to venture out increasing, women are more cautious about engaging in some out-of-home activities than men. One-fifth (19%) say they are comfortable eating in a crowded restaurant compared to one-third (28%) of men, while only 7 percent of women are willing to take public transportation, in contrast to 13 percent of men.

"I'm hoping that we can get some control [over our lives] and opportunities to see friends."

— D.S., female, 76

Comfortable doing the following activities — NOW

■ Women ■ Men

"I'm a hugger. If I see someone now, I step back and jump away from them, and make sure they have their six feet. That's dehumanizing to me."

— N.D., female, 56

Implications

While it is evident that the pandemic has impacted the healthy living of adults ages 50-plus, women are reporting the repercussions – both physical and mental - more acutely than men. Their difficulty in maintaining a healthy lifestyle stems more from changes in eating habits, increased anxiety and limited options for social and physical activity.

Yet on a positive note, women recognize the issues and are keen to address them. They are already actively boosting their well-being with vitamins, as well as trying to keep sharp by learning a skill or taking up a new hobby. Looking ahead, they are determined to lose weight, and are optimistic that with upping exercise this will be achievable.

However, some pandemic effects are lingering more for women than men. For example, trepidation amongst women for resuming certain pre-pandemic activities, such as eating out, using public transportation and attending indoor events may point to the impact of higher stress and anxiety among women. These findings suggest that the impact of COVID-19 differs for men and women which may require tailored approaches and more nuanced pro-health communications when talking to older adults about ways to regain their healthy lifestyle during the pandemic and beyond.

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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