

Changes in mental health, eating and physical activity in England across Covid-19 pandemic lockdown

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Key information

1. Stark rise in negative mental health since start of lockdown measures
2. Decreased physical activity
3. Increased binge eating and consumption of processed snacks and alcohol
4. Poor eating and reduced physical activity contributed to negative mental health in Covid-19 lockdown.

Methods

An electronic questionnaire survey was carried out by the University of Oxford. 837 adults age 18 to 81 across England were surveyed between 19th June and 6th July 2020 concerning mental health, eating, and physical activity before lockdown, during early lockdown, and the time of survey.

Mental health

Over half of the sample reported experiencing anxiety and poor sleep during lockdown. Compared to pre-lockdown experience, there were reported increases in anxiety, poor sleep, persistent sadness, binge eating, and thoughts of suicide – the latter particularly worrying, as the proportion of respondents experiencing this during lockdown more than doubled. Younger adults suffered these effects disproportionately highly.

	Experienced since lockdown		Occurred regularly before lockdown	
	N	%	N	%
Anxiety	552	66	403	48
Not sleeping well	534	64	386	46
Persistent sadness	259	31	179	21
Binge eating	190	23	117	14
Thoughts of suicide	91	11	34	4

Three quotes from the survey crystallise these quantitative observations:

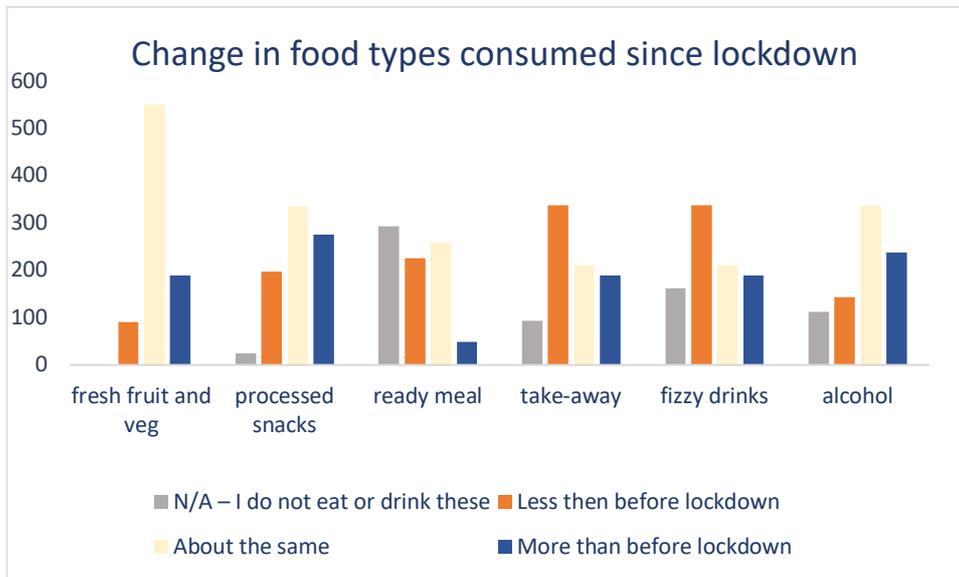
'The days being repetitive and seemingly blending into one another makes me idealise suicide sometimes. I have made no plans but ponder it at least twice a week—sometimes every day. This is more often than before lockdown. I think my lack of control is why my eating disorder has been creeping up on me. I'm a bit bummed out that my fitness progress has gone' (Female, age 20, North East).

'Developed anxiety and depression. Hurt shoulder as I got angry and slammed a door (still sore after a month), sleep is very poor, can't concentrate.' (Male, 39, West Midlands)

"Increase in low moods and anxiety from an uncommon frequency to a daily or every other day occurrence. I increased my antidepressants as well as worked [on] self care. Insomnia.' (Non-binary, 24, North East)

Eating

Since lockdown, there is a mixed picture of higher consumption of both fruit and vegetables and of processed snacks, higher consumption of alcohol and reduced consumption of sugar-sweetened drinks. There is also lower consumption of ready meals.



These quotes from the surveys illustrate these changes:

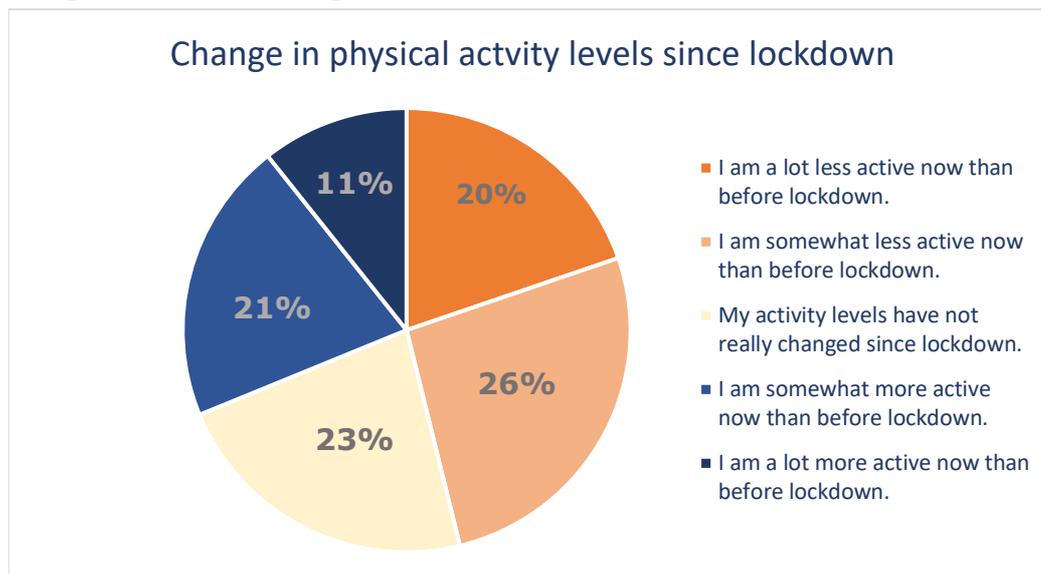
'Feeling demotivated to take care of my health as much. Relying more on comfort food (including alcohol) to cope.' (Female, 30, South East)

'More snacking whilst working at home.' (Female, 53, North West)

'Fruits and vegetables especially have been harder to find, generally of lower quality and considerably more expensive' (Male, 22, North West)

'Home delivery difficult to get. As I walk to the local Tesco as rarely as possible, I use less 'heavy' groceries and things that go off, such as fizzy drinks and fruit.' (Male, 45, East Midlands)

Physical activity



46% of survey respondents report being less active than before, with 23% reporting no change and 32% more active.

Poor eating and reduced physical activity contributed to negative mental health in Covid-19 lockdown

In narrative accounts, the combination of poor eating and reduced physical activity was cited as contributing to negative mental health.

'Anxiety has increased in severity, having problems comfort eating. I also can't exercise in the way I want to (swimming, aerobics classes) so I'm putting on weight, which is making my depression worse, which in turn makes me want to eat more.' (Female, 27, South East)

'Even though I'm doing less exercise I find it more tiring. Lacking structure in my day makes everything blend into one.' (Male, 27, Greater London)

'Feeling constantly exhausted from childcare and work stress, put on over a stone in weight. Unable to exercise properly because can't get the time or motivation to do so.' (Female, 41, West Midlands)