

Survey reveals hidden health and wellness benefits of COVID-19 pandemic

February 26 2021



Cory M. Smith, Ph.D., bottom row center, director of UTEP's Human and Environmental Physiology Laboratory (HEPL), is the principal investigator on UTEP's COVID-19 Survival Survey. He is joined by UTEP undergraduate and graduate students, top row, from left, Owen Salmon, Joel Jauregui, Heriberto Sanchez and Christopher Bryant; and bottom row, from left, Marni Shoemaker and Jasmin Jenkins. Credit: UTEP Communications.

A study by physiology researchers at The University of Texas at El Paso found that El Paso's stay-at-home ordinance due to the COVID-19 pandemic had positive effects on the health and well-being of the region's residents.

Despite a shutdown of gyms and movement restrictions on non-essential activities, residents increased their fitness activity and closely monitored their food and nutrition intake, said Cory M. Smith, Ph.D., assistant professor of kinesiology in UTEP's College of Health Sciences and the study's principal investigator.

More than 1,300 El Paso and Las Cruces, New Mexico, residents participated in Smith's COVID-19 Survival Survey during the month of September 2020. Questions focused on their [personal changes](#) in [physical activity](#), nutritional habits, and changes in thoughts and attitudes toward common hygiene practices and [emergency preparedness](#) in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the El Paso County's Work Safe, Stay Home order that went into effect March 24, 2020.

According to the data, 37% of participants said they improved their exercise practices by changing their exercise focus, exercising more and trying new fitness activities, and 15% said they increased their outdoor recreation activities. Forty-five percent of residents responded that they increased self-monitoring of their food intake.

"We hypothesized that people were going to exercise less during the pandemic after gyms and fitness facilities were shut down," said Smith, director of UTEP's Human and Environmental Physiology Laboratory (HEPL). "But when we began to evaluate the data, we found some hidden health benefits of the pandemic. People were exercising more and eating better. Hopefully, this data will give us a better understanding of how people react during a public health crisis and how we can better prepare for future public health emergencies."

Smith attributed the study's positive [health](#) outcomes to people's increased awareness of the risk factors associated with COVID-19, a highly contagious respiratory illness caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

Before El Paso implemented the stay-at-home order, 39% of participants reported a high level of concern for contracting COVID-19 compared with 50% of individuals who reported a low level of concern for catching coronavirus. Eleven percent indicated they were not concerned.

After the order went into effect, the number of respondents who had a high level of concern for contracting COVID-19 increased to 57%. Individuals who reported a low level of concern for the virus dropped to 39%, and 4% of participants reported no concern.

The survey revealed that residents who felt sick were more likely to stay home and not go to work, school, or social events after the stay-at-home order. In addition, the implementation of the Stay at Home Ordinance increased handwashing and sanitizing frequency in 92% of individuals.

Data on changes in employment, nutrition habits and physical activity are also included in the survey.

Smith planned to share the results with the City of El Paso. He said data could be used to improve community protocols to better enforce public safety guidelines in the event of a future pandemic.

Provided by University of Texas at El Paso

Citation: Survey reveals hidden health and wellness benefits of COVID-19 pandemic (2021, February 26) retrieved 10 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-02-survey-reveals-hidden-health-wellness.html>

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