

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused changes to people's wellbeing around the world

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There has been great variability in people's physical activity during COVID-19 pandemic. Photo: University of Jyväskylä

According to an international study published in *Frontiers in Psychology*, people around the world have reported changes in their physical activity

levels, wellbeing, and eating habits during the first stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. A decrease in physical activity during the pandemic was associated with poorer perceived physical and mental health. Reduced exercise was also associated with perceptions of weight gain and decreased sleep.

More than a thousand individuals from several countries with different containment measures participated in an [online survey](#) that explored changes in [physical activity](#), eating, sleep, physical and mental health, and wellbeing during the first lockdown phases of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study was conducted in collaboration between the Faculty of Sport and Health Sciences at the University of Jyväskylä, the University of Wolverhampton and the University of Northampton in the United Kingdom.

Comparisons across countries revealed significant differences in [physical health](#), with Finnish participants reporting higher values and participants residing in the UK indicating poorer health.

There was great variability in participants' physical activity. Some individuals reported a high increase in physical activity while others reported a great decrease.

"Increased physical activity was associated with better physical health as rated over the past week along with increased wellbeing and sleep," says Sport and Exercise Psychology Lecturer Montse Ruiz from the Faculty of Sport and Health Sciences at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. "In contrast, reduced physical activity was related to lowest mental health, represented by more personal and emotional problems, and a significant increase in eating and weight."

Participants living in Latin American countries perceived themselves to have poorer mental health, compared to South Koreans who indicated

being significantly less affected by personal or emotional problems. Filipino participants reported higher sleep and eating scores compared to the other countries.

"Our findings indicate that irrespective of country of residence or age, participants reporting reduced physical activity typically experienced poorer physical and mental health along with diminished wellbeing," Ruiz says. "Reduced exercise was also associated with perceptions of weight gain and decreased sleep."

To minimize the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, a range of containment measures, including the restriction of people's movement, were implemented in several countries. As a result, changes in people's behaviors were observed, such as the well-documented instances of panic buying and stockpiling of household items.

"As the containment measures related to COVID-19 continue, our findings highlight the importance of exercise in maintaining good physical and [mental health](#)," Ruiz says. "As such, we encourage individuals to find ways of incorporating physical activity into their day where possible."

More information: Montse C. Ruiz et al. A Cross-Cultural Exploratory Study of Health Behaviors and Wellbeing During COVID-19, *Frontiers in Psychology* (2021). [DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2020.608216](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.608216)

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