

COVID-19 restrictions supported participants in weight loss program, but had negative impact on mood and behaviors

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New research presented at this year's European Congress on Obesity (ECO2021, online, 10-13 May) concludes that the first lockdown in the COVID-19 pandemic was an important driver in the motivation to lose

weight in participants of an online weight management program started in late 2020. Some participants associated the lockdown with weight gain through blocking social opportunities and access to facilities, explain the authors who include Meigan Thomson of the University of Glasgow, UK, and colleagues.

"Behavioral [weight loss](#) programs have been shown to be effective in improving health and weight outcomes in adults living with obesity," explain the authors. "The restrictions and changes imposed on the public due to COVID-19 resulted in a new experience and environment for weight loss. The aim of this study was to assess the perceived impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on participation and the weight loss journey."

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 48 participants. Participants were predominantly female (83%) with a mean age of 49 years and a mean BMI of 31.6 kg/m², falling in the obese range. Participants were recruited from a 12-week online behavioral weight loss program called "Second Nature" (see details in link below). The program has a continuous recruitment strategy and new groups start every week. Those participants who started the program between late October and January they were sent an email from the program explaining the study with contact details of the study authors, whom they could e-mail if they were happy to take part.

Interviews were conducted mid-way through the program in November and December 2020. The interviews asked participants about their barriers and facilitators to their weight loss journey and about the role that COVID-19 had played in their experience. Specifically, participants were asked about obesity as a risk factor for poorer COVID-19 outcomes and the impact the pandemic has had on their social life, environment, and weight.

The interviews revealed that COVID-19 played a role in participants

weight loss journeys before and during the program. COVID-19 played a role in [weight gain](#), motivation, self-efficacy, and unhealthy temptations. Just under half (44%) of participants attributed the "lockdown" restrictions earlier in the year to weight gain and 50% said the first lockdown had motivated them to lose weight.

Perceived risk of living with obesity or overweight in terms of poor outcomes if infected with coronavirus was a motivator for change 54% of those interviewed. Three quarters (75%) of participants said COVID-19 restrictions supported their weight loss journey; however a similar proportion (69%) said that the restrictions hindered their weight loss journey. Just under half (46%) said the pandemic had both helped and hindered their weight loss efforts. Thus there were many participants who could see both positive and negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on their efforts.

Participants identified changes to the home, work, and social environments as either facilitators or barriers to the lifestyle changes they were trying to make. Particularly, participants reported having more ownership of their surroundings by being at home more (and for example were able to not keep any tempting unhealthy foods in the house), but said they had less social support to help them lose weight.

The authors say: "COVID-19 and the restrictions imposed had an impact on participant's weight loss journeys while participating in an online behavioral weight loss program with effects on their efforts to eat healthily and also be physically active. The impact of the restrictions and knowledge of the virus itself served to promote motivation and behavior change."

They conclude: "The findings provide novel insight into participant experiences in a behavioral [weight](#) loss program during a pandemic. Such insights may be able to provide suggestions on how to improve

online programs which can be accessed by those who are unable to, or prefer not to, attend in-person programs."

Provided by European Association for the Study of Obesity

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