

L.A. eating habits changed significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic

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More than half of Los Angeles County residents made changes to their diet during the COVID-19 pandemic, with more than a quarter of them reporting that they ate more healthily, according to a new study by USC

researchers.

The study, recently published online in the journal *Appetite*, is part of a partnership between Los Angeles County and a team of researchers led by Public Exchange at the USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences. The group has collaborated over the last year to study the effects that COVID-19 had on food systems and eating habits in Los Angeles.

Using data from the Understanding Coronavirus in America survey conducted by the USC Dornsife Center for Economic and Social Research along with information from L.A. County officials and other sources, the researchers determined if—and how—people's diets changed during the pandemic.

About 28% of residents said they had improved their diets by eating more fruits and vegetables and less processed food; however, nearly a quarter of respondents reported that the quality of their [diet](#) had decreased. Young adults, people with children in their household and those with [health conditions](#) such as obesity were some of the groups that were more likely to have made unhealthy dietary shifts. Individuals who were more likely to report healthy changes were Black or Hispanic, had received unemployment insurance, or had larger networks of friends and family members.

One surprising study finding was that poverty was not necessarily linked to negative diet changes. People experiencing food insecurity were as likely to make healthy shifts as unhealthy ones, according to Sydney Miller, lead study author and a Ph.D. student in population and public health sciences at the Keck School of Medicine of USC.

"We expected these [financial hardships](#) would cause unhealthy shifts, but it was surprising and encouraging to see that disruptions in one's life,

even when they're negative, can lead to positive changes," she says.

Kayla de la Haye, associate professor of preventive medicine at the Keck School of Medicine and a co-author of the study, adds that the indication that households with children had more unhealthy diets was worrying.

"Kids develop their preferences for food very early in life. They can start to have really early onset risk factors for things like diabetes and obesity, which are hard to change later on in life," she says. Poor diet is a leading cause of mortality among U.S. adults.

Eating is a very habitual behavior, says de la Haye, and the COVID-19 pandemic led people to adopt different daily routines. The key now, she says, is to figure out how to keep the healthy habits going after the end of the pandemic, and how to switch the eating routines of people whose diets have declined. Some issues—like the lack of grocery stores in parts of town and the comparatively high price of fruits and vegetables—are long-standing ones, but there are some ways individuals and communities can help shift eating behaviors.

"We need to advocate for policies that are going to help healthy options be the easy options, that are affordable and accessible to everybody. We should do things in our workplaces, schools and faith organizations so that people are not bombarded with unhealthy options and cues, and instead are really supported to develop healthy routines," she says. "I think it really takes a community effort to do that."

More information: Sydney Miller et al, Self-reported dietary changes among Los Angeles County adults during the COVID-19 pandemic, *Appetite* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.appet.2021.105586](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2021.105586)

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