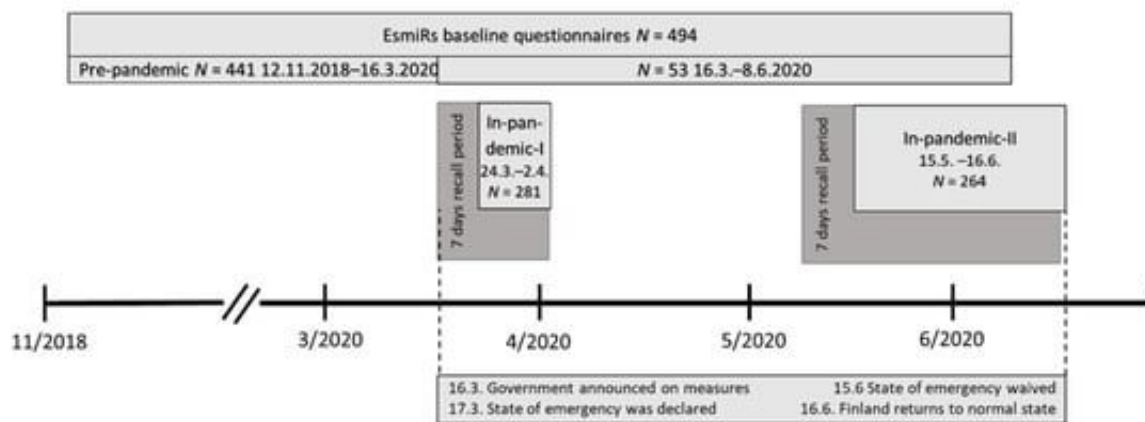


# Depressive symptoms, irregular eating increased during the COVID-19 pandemic among middle-aged women

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The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted everyday life for a year and a half. Two recent studies examined changes in the health behaviors and depressive symptoms of middle-aged Finns as well as the role of personality in these changes.

In the first study, middle-aged [women's health behaviors](#) and [depressive symptoms](#) were examined before the [pandemic](#) as well as at the onset and at the end of the COVID-19 emergency conditions in Finland (March–June 2020). Middle-aged women reported more depressive symptoms and more irregular eating habits at the end of the emergency

conditions than before the pandemic. On the other hand, no changes in alcohol use and leisure time [physical activity](#) were observed.

"We found these adverse changes to accumulate partly for the same people," postdoctoral researcher Tiia Kekäläinen from the Faculty of Sport and Health Sciences, University of Jyväskylä, says. "For example, in women who had unhealthier changes in eating habits, depressive symptoms and alcohol use also increased."

## **Women were more likely to change their physical activity than men were**

When asked for self-perceived changes in physical activity during the pandemic, slightly less than half of the women said they had decreased their physical activity, about a third reported no changes and a fifth increased their physical activity.

In another study, changes in physical activity were investigated among both women and men. The results were similar, though nearly half reported that their physical activity remained unchanged. Women were more likely than men to report both increasing and decreasing physical activity, while men more often reported that their physical activity remained unchanged.

## **Personality plays a role in adaption to a pandemic situation**

Both studies also looked at the role of personality traits in adaption to the pandemic situation. More extroverted women reported decreased alcohol use and healthier changes in their eating habits than did less extroverted women. Women with [high scores](#) in neuroticism reported both healthier and unhealthier changes in their eating habits.

"Avoiding social contacts was strongly recommended during the emergency conditions and, for example, restaurants were partially closed," Kekäläinen says. "The decrease in meeting friends and eating out may explain the change to healthier [eating habits](#) and lower alcohol use among extroverted women.

"Neuroticism is characterized by negative effects such as anxiety and a susceptibility to stress. During the pandemic, such characteristics may have caused unhealthy habits such as emotional eating, or, conversely, careful following of a diet."

In the second dataset, extroversion and, in particular, a facet of it called activity was linked to changes in physical activity: activity was linked to both an increase and a decrease in physical activity.

"The activity facet reflects a tendency to live a busy life with a rapid tempo," says Kekäläinen. "Restrictions during the pandemic and canceled hobbies and events may have offered opportunities to spend more time on physical activity. For others, canceled physical activities and less frequent going from one place to another may have caused a decrease in physical activity."

The first study utilized data from 358 women. Women aged 51 to 59 were part of the Estrogen, Micro-RNAs and the Risk of Metabolic Dysfunction (EsmiRs) follow-up study. Self-reported data on health behaviors, depressive symptoms and personality traits were available from the pre-pandemic time. Participants reported health behaviors and changes in them and depressive symptoms at the onset (March 2020) and at the end (June 2020) of emergency conditions in Finland.

The second dataset consisted of 168 women and men around the age of 61 who participated in the latest data collection of the Jyväskylä Longitudinal Study of Personality and Social Development (JYLS)

between April 2020 and April 2021. Participants reported physical activity and changes in it during the pandemic as part of a larger interview and personality was assessed by a self-reported questionnaire.

**More information:** Tiia Kekäläinen et al, Personality Traits and Changes in Health Behaviors and Depressive Symptoms during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Longitudinal Analysis from Pre-pandemic to Onset and End of the Initial Emergency Conditions in Finland, *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* (2021). [DOI: 10.3390/ijerph18157732](https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18157732)

Tiia Kekäläinen et al, The role of personality traits in leisure time physical activity during COVID-19 pandemic, *Personality and Individual Differences* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.paid.2021.111080](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2021.111080)

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