

Health declining in U.S. Northeast during pandemic

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As the COVID pandemic continues, new research reveals how people in Vermont and Maine are struggling with their mental and physical health.

The findings detail numerous troubling health trends—including significant increases in anxiety, depression, [weight gain](#), [substance use](#), chronic disease, missed medications and food insecurity—since the pandemic's onset.

The new report, released today by University of Vermont and University of Maine researchers, suggests that many of these [health problems](#) are highest among individuals suffering from food insecurity.

"The pandemic has added so much stress and uncertainty to people's lives, these findings show the mental and physical toll it's having," says Meredith Niles of UVM, who leads the National Food Access and COVID research Team (NFACT), a consortium of researchers in 15 states.

Key findings:

- Nearly 50% reported anxiety or depression during the pandemic.
- Roughly 40% reported weight gain.
- Roughly 29% reported food insecurity.
- Individuals with food insecurity were up to 7 times more likely to skip or stop medication for anxiety, depression, or hypertension, compared to food secure respondents.
- Those with persistent food insecurity (before and during the pandemic) were 8.8 times more likely to experience higher levels of stress, 2.6 times more likely to experience anxiety, and be diagnosed with type 2 diabetes and hypertension.
- Users of alcohol, tobacco, or drugs were more likely to increase substance use. Substance use was also associated with a higher prevalence of stress.
- Food insecure individuals were significantly less likely to consume fruits and vegetables and engage in physical activity than those who are food secure.

- LGBTQ+ individuals were more likely to be food insecure, 4 times more likely to report anxiety or depression, and experienced greater stress than non-LGBTQ+ individuals.

The research is based on a survey of nearly 1,000 adults in Vermont and Maine in 2021.

"These findings shed light on some of the pandemic's potential long-term health impacts," says Jennifer Laurent of UVM's College of Nursing and Health Sciences. "These rates of obesity, type 2 diabetes, depression and anxiety are very concerning—and it's alarming that people are skipping and stopping medications. We need integrated approaches to address these issues, including among the food insecure, who generally face greater barriers to support for [mental health](#) and well-being."

One of the most surprising findings were the elevated health issues in the LGBTQ+ community, the researchers say.

"Comparing health outcomes across different demographics, we were struck by the impact COVID-19 is having on our LGBTQ+ respondents," says Farryl Bertmann of UVM's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. "We found patterns of significant health concern, including higher rates of food insecurity and an increased likelihood of depression and anxiety."

NFACT researchers have conducted multiple surveys and analyses tracking food security and [health](#) during COVID. Previous NFACT research has determined that U.S. food insecurity increased 34% in year one of the pandemic, food insecurity hit record levels in Vermont, and that home [food](#) procurement—from hunting to gardening—increased in the Northeast as a solution to [food insecurity](#).

More information: Report: [scholarworks.uvm.edu/cgi/viewc ...](https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/cgi/viewc...)

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Provided by University of Vermont

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