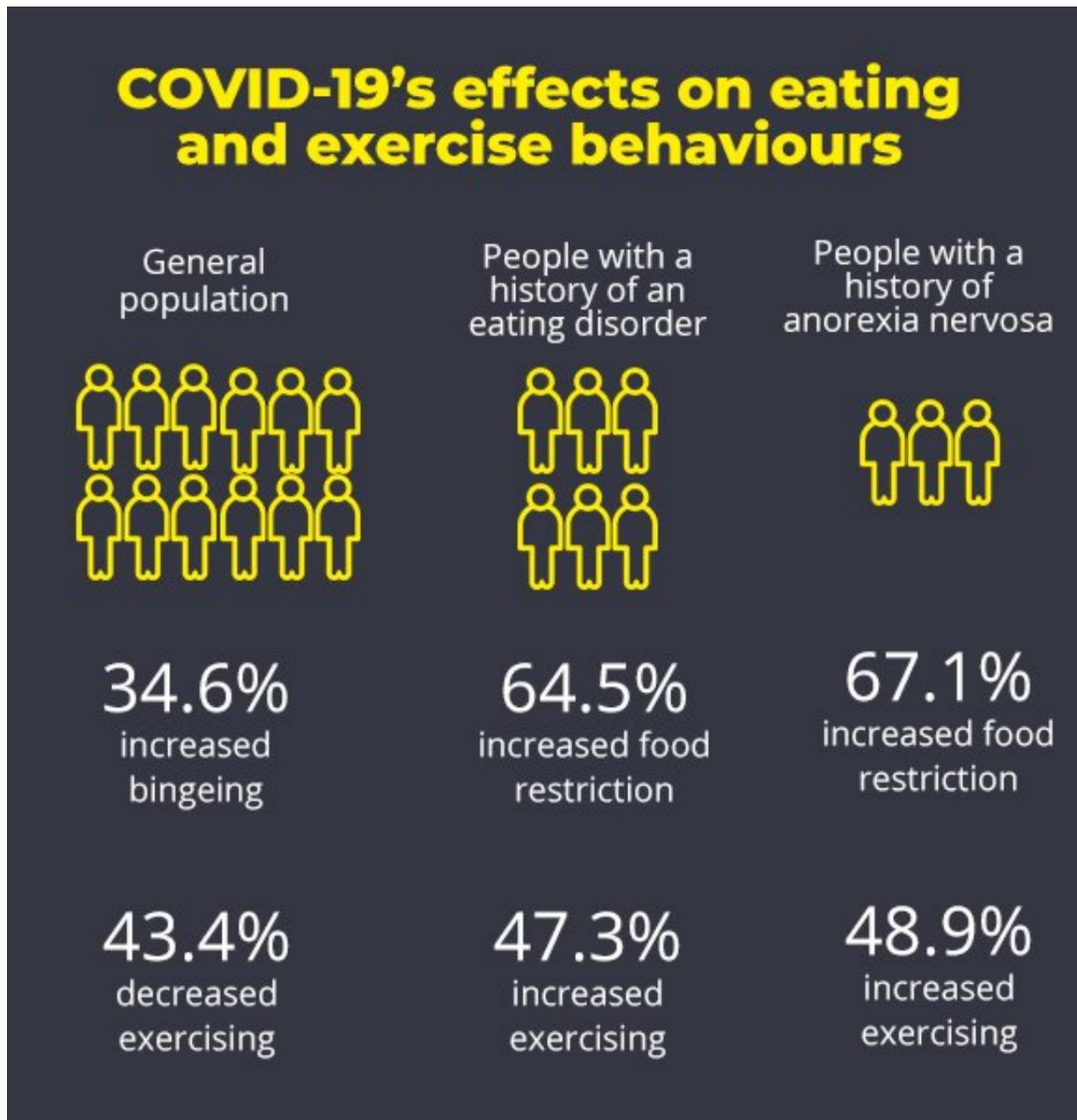


Investigating the effects of COVID-19 on eating and exercise behaviours

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Credit: Swinburne University of Technology

A study has found that COVID-19 has resulted in reduced exercising and increased bingeing and restriction behaviours in the general population. This study, which was conducted by researchers from Swinburne's Centre for Mental Health has been published in the *International Journal of Eating Disorders*.

"When the COVID-19 situation started, it was clear that it was likely to negatively affect the [mental health](#) of Australians, however how this [pandemic](#) would affect people's eating and exercise behaviours was unclear," says lead author and Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for Mental Health, Dr. Andrea Phillipou.

To identify these changes, an Australia-wide survey was launched on 1 April 2020. The COVID-19 and you: mental health in Australia now survey (COLLATE) is an anonymous online survey that opens for 72 hours at the beginning of each month. The first COLLATE survey included a broad range of questions aimed at assessing the mental health impact of the COVID-19 situation on the Australian population.

Recording changes in eating and exercise behaviours

Four questions specifically relating to changes in restricting (deliberately limiting your amount of food); bingeing (eating an unusually large amount of food); purging (deliberately making yourself sick or taking laxatives to control your weight); and exercising behaviours were included in this survey. Respondents were specifically asked to report on changes in these behaviours since the COVID-19 situation started.

Data collected from this survey were analysed based on three groups of respondents: those who reported a [history](#) of eating disorders; a sub-group of those who reported a history of anorexia nervosa; and those who did not report a history of eating disorders (the '[general population](#)').

Out of 5,469 respondents who completed the eating and exercise behaviours section of this survey, 180 self-identified as having an eating disorder. Of this group, 88 reported as having a history of anorexia nervosa.

A significant proportion of the eating disorder group reported an exacerbation in these behaviours since the pandemic started, particularly increased restriction (64.5 percent) and exercising (47.3 percent). Additionally, 35.5 percent reported increased bingeing behaviours while 18.9 percent reported increased purging behaviours.

Similarly, 67.1 percent of respondents who identified as having a history of anorexia nervosa reported increased levels of restriction and 48.9 percent reported increased levels of exercise. A smaller proportion of this sub-group reported increased bingeing (20.5 percent) and purging (18.2 percent) behaviours.

"These results show that even during the very early stages of this pandemic, (roughly three weeks after the official announcement by the World Health Organisation), this group of people were already reporting spikes in these behaviours. This could have been due to increased stress, anxiety and depressive symptoms as a result of social distancing measures," explains Dr. Phillipou.

On the other hand, of the respondents who did not report a history of eating disorders, 26 percent reported a greater level of food restriction while 34.6 percent reported increased bingeing behaviours since the

pandemic started. In addition, 43.4 percent reported less exercise than before the COVID-19 situation

A need for more psychological support

"Overall, we found that there is potential for adverse psychological and health consequences in the general population because of reduced exercising and increased bingeing behaviours since the COVID-19 situation. Critically, a spike in disordered eating behaviours was reported in individuals with eating disorders within the initial stages of the pandemic," Dr. Phillipou explains.

She adds, "it is crucial that we provide greater psychological support to individuals with eating [disorders](#) during this time. Given the uncertainty regarding the length of this pandemic and its rapidly evolving nature, it is essential that we continue to closely monitor these patients and provide greater support to attenuate increasing disordered eating symptoms."

More information: Andrea Phillipou et al. Eating and exercise behaviors in eating disorders and the general population during the COVID -19 pandemic in Australia: Initial results from the COLLATE project, *International Journal of Eating Disorders* (2020). [DOI: 10.1002/eat.23317](#)

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