

More than half of people struggled to manage their weight during COVID-19 lockdown, suggests UK survey

2 September 2020



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More than half of adults have found it difficult to manage their weight during the COVID-19 lockdown, according to the results of an online survey involving over 800 UK adults, being presented at The European and International Congress on Obesity (ECOICO), held online this year (1-4 September).

Most say their difficulties stemmed from increased snacking, not exercising as much as usual, increased anxiety or stress, and not being able to get hold of healthier food. However, those questioned who had received [weight-management](#) support from a slimming club continued to lose weight during this time, exercised more, and reporting higher overall wellbeing compared to respondents from the [general population](#).

The findings come at a time when the UK Government has unveiled a new obesity strategy with its 'Better Health' campaign to encourage millions of adults to kick start their health and

reduce their risk of serious illness, including COVID-19. An estimated two-thirds (63%) of UK adults are above a healthy weight, with 36% having overweight, and 28% having obesity.

The new research was led by the UK's largest group-based weight-loss organisation Slimming World as part of their Health and Wellbeing Study which is surveying new members regularly over the course of one year about aspects of their health and lifestyle. The survey at the six-month point coincided with lockdown, so questions were added to learn more about how lockdown measures had impacted the nation's health, wellbeing, and lifestyle behaviours.

Between 9 April and 16 May 2020, 222 Slimming World members (94% female, average age 52 years) and a representative sample of 637 adults in the general population completed an online survey asking their opinions about their general health, mood, diet, alcohol intake, physical activity, and weight management.

Similar proportions of the general population (65%; 414/637) and Slimming World members (59%; 131/222) admitted to finding managing their weight since lockdown "very" or "somewhat difficult". The four key reasons given by both groups included difficulty getting to the shops and obtaining the usual healthy foods; boredom and being at home leading to increased snacking; higher levels of stress and anxiety leading to comfort eating; and more sedentary time and exercising less. However, some respondents in both groups reported some benefits of lockdown including more time to plan meals, cooking from scratch, and sticking to a routine.

Two in five (42%) Slimming World members and one in three (34%) of the general population

admitted eating more sugary foods during lockdown, each timepoint, rather than following the same while one in four (27%) members and one in five (18%) of the general population reported reaching for fatty foods. When looking at key parts of the diet, data indicated that members had a healthier overall diet than non-members (healthy eating score 13 vs 10; with a higher value indicating better overall diet quality).

This could help explain why Slimming World members reported continuing to lose weight during this time, with an average weight loss of 2kg (4.4 lbs) at the early stages of lockdown compared to three months earlier.

The research also highlighted differences in the impact of lockdown on overall health and wellbeing—fewer members said that their [general health](#) had been negatively affected compared to the general population (14% vs 22%). In addition, members said they had exercised more (25% vs 17%) and reported higher overall wellbeing (wellbeing score 28 vs 24; with a higher score indicating more positive wellbeing).

More than a quarter (28%) of members and 16% of the general population said they were drinking more alcohol during lockdown. Their reported alcohol intake was within government guidelines, with Slimming World members consuming around 13 units per week and respondents from the general population 14 units per week.

Dr. Sarah-Elizabeth Bennett, Slimming World's Senior Research Associate, who led the study says: "Lockdown inevitably had an effect on our choices around food, drink and activity. Given that excess weight is associated with a higher risk of severe illness from COVID-19 and with lots of people coming out of lockdown feeling concerned about their weight and [health](#), the findings of the study show behaviour change support is more important now than ever."

The authors point to several limitations, including the reduced sample size of those who had completed all surveys to the point of lockdown, and the inclusion of self-reported data which could be prone to reporting biases. The study included a representative sample of the general [population](#) at

each timepoint, rather than following the same people, therefore it was difficult to make certain comparisons over time. The authors also noted that there could be variations in behaviour and [wellbeing](#) depending upon when respondents completed the survey, given the rapidly changing news and guidance during [lockdown](#). Finally, they did not account for potentially confounding factors such as comorbidities, which may have influenced lifestyle behaviour changes.

Provided by European Association for the Study of Obesity

APA citation: More than half of people struggled to manage their weight during COVID-19 lockdown, suggests UK survey (2020, September 2) retrieved 27 October 2021 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-09-people-struggled-weight-covid-lockdown.html>

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