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How pandemic has affected our mental and physical health

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We're more than one year into the global pandemic that has kept many Americans sequestered in their homes and taking precautions to prevent the spread of Covid-19 when they go out. Not surprisingly, these changes in how and when we interact with others has led to changes in our mental and physical health. Among those changes, emerging data show that many Americans have gained weight, are drinking more alcohol and are not sleeping well.

A nationally-representative survey of 1,500 Americans conducted this year by the American Psychological Association found that more than 40 per cent of Americans gained "more weight than they intended" during the pandemic. The average weight gain was 29 pounds, with 10 per cent of participants reporting more than 50 pounds of weight gain. In addition, 18 per cent of Americans reported losing more weight than they wanted to; the average amount of weight lost was 26 pounds.

In addition to weight changes, more than two-third of adults reported sleeping more or less than they wanted to. Nearly a quarter reported drinking more alcohol to cope with the stress of the pandemic. And more than 30 per cent reported increased mental health issues since the start of the pandemic.

The survey also collected information on specific groups of Americans, for example parents. The data show that parents experienced more mental and physical health problems than others. Nearly half of mothers reported a decline in their mental health since the start of the pandemic (compared to 30 per cent of all adults). Nearly half of fathers reported drinking more during the pandemic to cope with stress. Compared to the general population, parents were significantly more likely to have received treatment from a mental health professional and been diagnosed with a mental health disorder since the pandemic began.

The pandemic has also taken a heavy toll on essential workers. More than half report relying on "unhealthy habits" to cope with pandemic stress. Such workers were more than twice as likely as adults who are not essential workers to have been diagnosed with a mental health disorder since the coronavirus pandemic started.

Finally, racial minorities were more likely than others to report health declines during the pandemic. Both black and Hispanic adults were more likely to report trouble sleeping and weight gain compared to white adults. In addition, black participants expressed more concern about the future and anxiety about re-adjusting to in-person interactions.

A separate study published in the fall underscores the increase in alcohol consumption among Americans. Researchers surveyed a nationally-representative sample of 6,000 Americans to find out how often participants drank alcohol and how much they drank.

Researchers found participants increased the number of days they consumed alcohol by 14 per cent during the pandemic. In addition, women reported a 41 per cent increase in heavy drinking (four or more drinks in a short time period) and significantly more adverse consequences related to alcohol consumption.

The take-home message is no surprise: The global pandemic has taken a significant toll on Americans' physical and mental health beyond illness related to Covid-19.