



Predictors of Health Behaviors during the COVID-19 Pandemic and Preferences regarding Receipt of Professional Services

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Abstract

Background

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared the outbreak of COVID-19 a pandemic. Following the rapid spread of the virus, the Ministry of Health in Israel, as in many other countries, issued increasingly stringent directives severely restricting movement outside of the home, including the closure of educational institutions, the cancellation of group recreational activities, and the requirement that many employees around the country work from home.

A previous report (Laron & Goldwag, 2020)¹ at the end of March 2020 examined the impact of these directives on health behaviors among the adult population aged 20-64, and reported on the consequent needs arising from isolation and prolonged confinement at home. The findings showed that as a result of the population's prolonged confinement and social disconnect from their surroundings, there were changes in the health behaviors of adults and children alike: Increased food consumption, especially snacks and candy, and a decline in the frequency and duration of physical activity which is liable to have a negative impact on health, particularly if the restrictions on staying at home continued for an extended period. Furthermore, the authors found that a high percentage of respondents reported an increase in depression compared with the regular pre-COVID situation, indicating a detrimental impact of the closures on the respondents' emotional state. The report noted the respondents' interest in professional advice on various topics, and via various channels, to promote healthy behaviors and to develop services to mitigate the negative impacts.

Study Goal

The study goal was to examine the correlation between the respondents' socio-demographic background and the changes in their health behaviors and emotional state during the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of this analysis is to identify vulnerable groups and to learn their preferences regarding the receipt of professional help.

¹ Laron, M., Goldwag, R. *Health Behaviors during the COVID-19 Pandemic – Preliminary Findings*. (2020). S-167-20 (Hebrew) <https://brookdale.jdc.org.il/en/publication/israeli-household-health-behaviors-corona/>

Study Method

The study was based on a panel survey of 1,500 Jewish residents of Israel, aged 20-64. The survey was conducted from March 26-29, 2020.

Findings

Concern about deterioration in their financial situation, poor health, and gender (women) predicted a significant increase in the amount of food intake, and a significant decrease in the quality of sleep. The financial concern also predicted less frequent and shorter physical activity, and an increase in depression. Women had a greater tendency to report an increase in depression than men. Respondents aged 50-64 were found to have a lower probability of changing their eating and physical-activity habits and of improving their emotional health than younger respondents.

No significant differences were found between adult respondents and the children living with them regarding changes in their physical activity. However, significant differences were found between adult respondents and their children regarding changes in eating and sleeping habits, and screen time (TV or online). The increase in the amount of screen time and food consumption, especially snacks and candy, was more pronounced among children than among their parents. In contrast, the decrease in sleep quality was more pronounced among adults than among their children.

When asked to indicate their interest in professional advice on various topics (at no cost), younger respondents and salaried employees were more interested in receiving advice than older respondents and the self-employed. Regarding the preferred channel of receiving said advice, women and non-ultra-Orthodox respondents preferred online assistance, while men preferred the telephone, and ultra-Orthodox respondents preferred to receive advice in writing.

Recommendations

The extent to which the pandemic's restrictive directives has affected healthy lifestyles varies substantially among individuals and is related to personal and social characteristics, such as gender, age, expectations regarding the financial situation, and health status. It is recommended that efforts focus on those sub-populations most at risk and take into account their preferences regarding the type of assistance and the channels of its receipt.

Interventions to increase physical activity during restrictions on mobility, and social isolation, may be offered uniformly to entire households, parents and children alike. In contrast, interventions to minimize overeating and the increase in screen time should focus differentially on children and adults in the same household, with the focus on children (relayed directly or via the parents), as the changes in their behavior were greater than those in their parents. Interventions to improve sleep quality should focus on adults as they were found to have suffered greater harm in this respect than their children.