

Americans Add Unwanted Pandemic Pounds

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It's been a year since the COVID-19 pandemic changed our lives virtually overnight. Since then we have found new ways to live, from the way we work and socialize to how we eat, drink and exercise.

Those changes have had some consequences – particularly to our waistlines. According to a recent study by the [American Psychology Association](#) (APA), 61% of Americans experienced undesired weight changes during the pandemic.

Jessica Bishop is a dietetic intern at OSF HealthCare Saint Francis Medical Center in Peoria. She says the survey results aren't surprising.

“Stress increase, boredom increase, and emotional eating may have also increased – mindless snacking. All of that combined over a whole year, I can very easily see where a lot of us may have gained some weight,” says Bishop.

Researchers polled more than 3,000 adults in the U.S., and found the average amount of unwanted weight gain was 29 pounds. Ten percent said they gained more than 50 pounds. The average unintended weight loss was 26 pounds.

Losing the structure of our day-to-day routines could also be a culprit in unwanted weight gain. According to Bishop, spending a lot more time at home with easy access to the snack cabinet can throw any diet off the rails if left unchecked.

“Maybe we are used to having three structured meals a day and having a snack when we get home,” Bishop says. “Well if we aren't going out, maybe we're just snacking multiple times. Not having that routine, not having those set meal times can really upend a diet, where you don't even know how much you are eating in a day.”

Bishop says that anyone wanting to lose unwanted pounds should start by making S.M.A.R.T. weight loss goals, or goals that are specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timely. She also recommends sticking to an 85-15% rule – eating healthy, nutrient-dense foods 85% of the time, and including occasional treats 15% of the time.

Breaking a new habit can be tough, but Bishop says you can do it with intentional planning. She also preaches patience; healthy weight loss isn't a fast process.

“It takes time. It's not going to happen in one day; it's going to be gradual. And we recommend that gradual loss. It's healthier for you and it helps long term, to keep that weight off as well.”

Significant weight gain can lead to a greater risk of heart disease, type 2 diabetes and stroke, among other issues. The World Obesity Federation has also found that increased bodyweight is “the second greatest predictor of hospitalization and a high risk of death for people suffering from COVID-19,” only ranking behind age as a risk factor.

Help is available for anyone looking for assistance in losing unwanted pounds, whether weight loss has been a life-long struggle or a person is looking to shed a recent weight gain. Contact your primary care physician to learn more about getting help from a dietitian. If you don't have a primary care provider, go to osfhealthcare.org or click [here](#).