

Did the pandemic spur a permanent decline in Americans' daily steps?

March 21 2023, by Amy Norton



If you feel like the pandemic made you a permanent couch potato, a new

study shows you're not alone: Well after lockdown measures were relaxed, many Americans were still taking fewer steps each day.

Researchers found that, on the whole, Americans' daily step count plummeted at the beginning of the pandemic in 2020—an understandable decline that prior studies have charted.

However, based on the new findings, people had not yet bounced back as of December 2021: U.S. adults were still taking around 700 fewer steps per day, compared to their pre-pandemic norm.

"It was really surprising to see that kind of impact over a year-and-a-half into the pandemic," said senior researcher [Dr. Evan Brittain](#), a heart disease specialist at Vanderbilt University Medical Center in Nashville, Tenn.

Physical activity is key in staving off [weight gain](#) and keeping up cardiovascular fitness levels—which, in turn, lowers the risk of developing serious health conditions like type 2 diabetes and heart disease.

So any sustained drop in an adult's [physical activity](#) is concerning, said [Dr. Carl "Chip" Lavie](#), medical director of cardiac rehabilitation and prevention at John Ochsner Heart and Vascular Institute in New Orleans.

Lavie, who was not involved in the study, said it adds to research documenting the nation's collective drop in step count since the pandemic's start. In some cases, he noted, studies have found even bigger declines.

Brittain noted the new study took a deeper look at the troubling trend than previous research did. His team used data from a large ongoing

research project that began tracking thousands of Americans' health in 2018. More than 5,000 participants wore Fitbit devices for at least six months before and after the pandemic's start.

Brittain's team found that, as expected, participants' daily step count tanked early in the pandemic, as stay-at-home orders and other containment measures took hold.

But while there was some rebound over time, people continued their pattern of less active days. Before COVID, study participants' median daily step count was about 7,800. That means half moved more than that, while half moved less.

By December 2021, that median step count was a little under 7,100 per day.

Some groups were more affected than others, Brittain said. For instance, people who had lower incomes or were living in more deprived neighborhoods showed a bigger drop in daily steps, compared with more affluent study participants.

There could be various reasons, according to Brittain—including the fact that lower-income Americans were the most affected by pandemic-related job losses, housing insecurity and other major stressors.

Plus, Brittain said, they may have had nowhere to go for exercise during lockdowns.

Age was also important, the study found. Younger adults typically had a significant and sustained drop in daily steps, whereas older adults held fairly steady. Brittain said that might be related to work, as many younger Americans shifted to working from home—and often made that a long-term change.

That automatically eliminates much of the incidental activity people get from trudging out into the world each day, Brittain explained.

The findings were published March 20 in the journal *JAMA Network Open*.

Lavie pointed to a recent study, published in the [Journal of Clinical Medicine](#), which focused on adults age 65 and up. It found that during the first three months of the pandemic, [older adults](#) were walking less and sitting more. However, they had returned to pre-pandemic activity levels within the year—a rebound that was not seen among the [younger people](#) in the latest study.

Mental well-being was another key factor, Brittain's team found: People who reported more mental distress on standard questionnaires showed a bigger drop in daily steps.

Of course, Brittain noted, that's a two-way street: People in poorer mental health tend to be less active, and that inactivity can take a toll on [mental well-being](#).

So in some cases, Brittain said, the barriers to getting moving again—from job loss to depression—have no easy fix.

For other people, though, the solution to pandemic inertia is a matter of awareness and motivation.

"Take a look at your behavior over the past couple years," Brittain said. "How has it changed?"

If you are still working from home, or ordering everything online rather than going out to shop, he said, try to find ways to get more steps into your day.

More information: The American College of Sports Medicine has advice on [getting moving](#).

Stacy Desine et al, Daily Step Counts Before and After the COVID-19 Pandemic Among All of Us Research Participants, *JAMA Network Open* (2023). [DOI: 10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2023.3526](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2023.3526)

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Citation: Did the pandemic spur a permanent decline in Americans' daily steps? (2023, March 21) retrieved 1 May 2023 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-03-pandemic-spur-permanent-decline-americans.html>

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