

The Effect of COVID-19 Social Distancing Mandates on Exercise and Diet Habits of UNM Medical Students

Bella Cervantes and Rachel Baca¹, Leonard Noronha, M.D.²

¹University of New Mexico School of Medicine, ²Department of Internal Medicine at University of New Mexico Hospital, Albuquerque, New Mexico



INTRODUCTION

Pandemic-related quarantines and their restrictions have been shown to cause psychological impacts and emotional distress on their imposed populations,¹ including health professional students.² Adequate exercise and a well-balanced diet are important modulators in maintaining good physical and emotional health. Consistent physical activity significantly reduces the incidence and severity of stress, depression, and anxiety.³ Consuming a healthy diet is important to maintaining good health.⁴ Prior to the pandemic, it had been shown that many medical students do not meet the recommendations for weekly physical activity.⁵⁻⁸ Lack of time has previously been cited as a major barrier to medical students' regular physical activity,^{8,9} and eating a healthy diet.⁹ With the imposed social distancing mandates reducing the amount of time required for medical students' obligations but also limiting access to exercise facilities and grocery stores, we were curious how this has affected the exercise and diet habits of UNM School of Medicine students.

METHODS

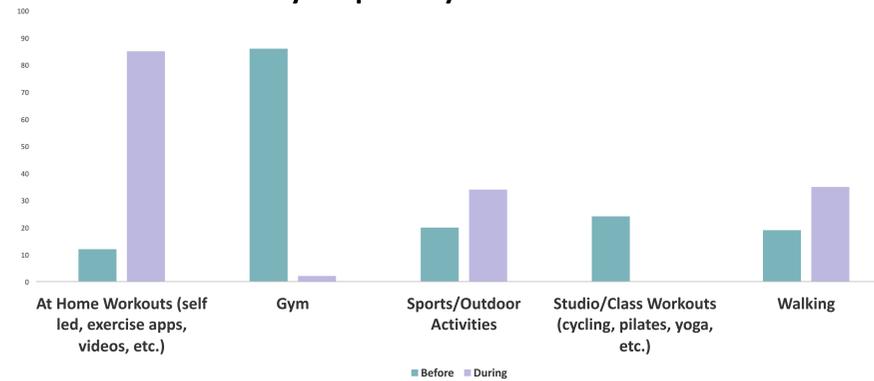
- REDCap survey containing 4 demographic questions, 8 exercise questions and 6 diet questions
- All participants provided informed consent to take part in this study, approved by the UNM Institutional Review Board
- Questions were paired so that they asked the same question but differentiated by questioning habits prior to and since March 13, 2020, the date COVID-19 was declared a national emergency and social distancing mandates took effect
- All graphs were constructed comparing percent changes from pre-COVID-19 to during-COVID-19 habits

RESULTS: DEMOGRAPHICS



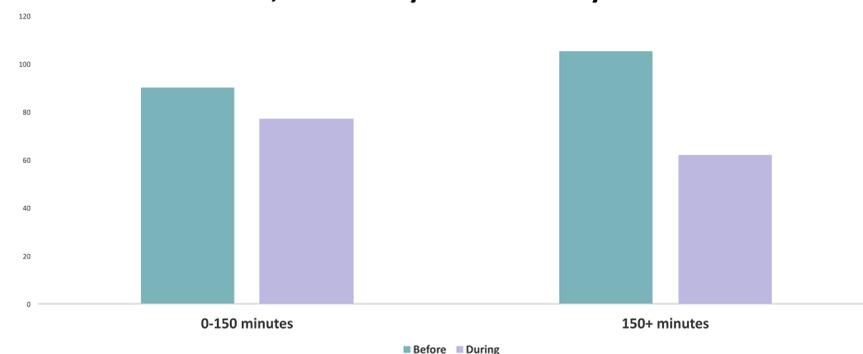
RESULTS: EXERCISE

What is your primary method of exercise?



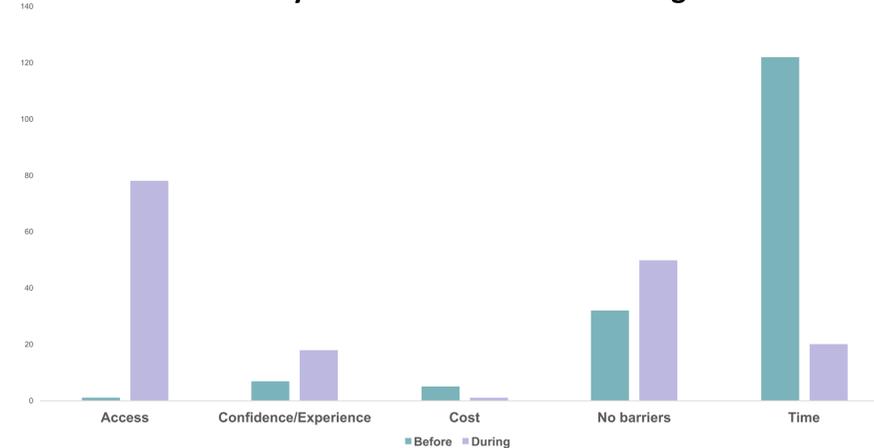
- More students participated in at home workouts (608%) and walking (84%)
- Fewer students attended the gym (-98%) or studio workouts (-100%)
- More students were willing to try a new type of workout (not shown)

Per week, how many minutes did you exercise?



- Of students previously meeting U.S. Recommendations, 19% fewer reported meeting this requirement during COVID-19

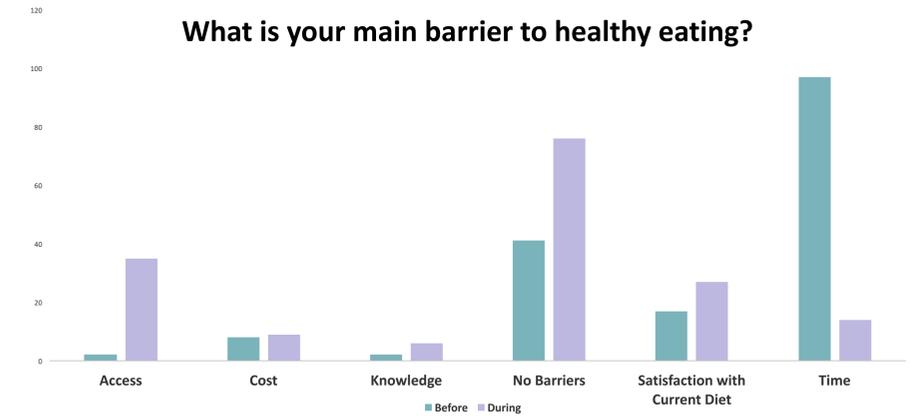
What is your main barrier to exercising?



- The main barrier to exercising before COVID-19 was time
- The main barrier to exercising during COVID-19 is access
- 56% increase in students reporting no barriers to exercising during COVID-19*

RESULTS: DIET

What is your main barrier to healthy eating?



- The main barrier to a healthy diet before COVID-19 was time
- 85% increase in students reporting no barriers to a healthy diet during COVID-19*

*These findings are a result of person by person study rather than population statistics as graphically represented in order to better represent individual changes

There was a **statistically significant difference ($p < .0001$) to method of work out, willingness to try a new workout method, barriers to exercise, frequency of eating out at a restaurant, and barriers to eating healthy** during the COVID-19 pandemic compared to before the pandemic. There was no difference between exercise duration and eating a healthy diet during the COVID-19 pandemic compared to before the pandemic.

CONCLUSIONS

Fewer UNM medical students met U.S. Recommendations for exercise during the COVID-19 pandemic but also reported healthier eating and eating out less. Exercise barriers such as closures might explain the decrease in exercise duration given that before COVID-19, the majority of students attended the gym/studio workouts. With more free time since school closure, medical students are more likely to cook meals at home. While time barriers decreased, access became a more predominant barrier, understandably so given the threats grocery stores pose as well as the closure of restaurants. Overall, although diet habits improved, exercise habits suffered. Further research is warranted in order to effectively advocate for exercise infrastructure, even in times of crises or pandemics.



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