



The Associated Press-NORC  
Center for Public Affairs Research

# CORONAVIRUS WORRIES AND SOCIAL ISOLATION AMONG OLDER ADULTS

With COVID-19 case counts remaining high in much of the United States, many adults age 50 and older remain worried about infection. These people are more likely to practice social distancing and to feel socially isolated, according to a new survey by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

Overall, majorities of adults age 50 and older rate their quality of life, mental health, and satisfaction with social activities and relationships positively. They also rarely or never feel that they lack companionship or feel isolated. Still, 18 months into the pandemic, 1 in 3 feels socially isolated at least sometimes. And 1 in 4 feels that their social life and relationships have gotten worse over the past year.

Those most worried about themselves or a loved one being infected by COVID-19 are more likely to practice social distancing measures like avoiding travel, staying away from large groups, and wearing a mask, and more often experience feelings of social isolation. These practices may be taking a toll: these people also rate their quality of life, mental and emotional health, and social activities and relationships as worse than those less concerned about the virus.

Vaccination is not providing people with relief. Those who are vaccinated are more worried about infection from the virus, are more likely to practice social distancing, and are more likely to describe their mental health as worse than last year compared to those who are not vaccinated.



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## Three Things You Should Know

About The Long-Term Care Poll on Social Isolation Among Adults Age 50 and Older:

- 1) 26% feel that their social relationships have gotten worse over the past year, and 23% feel the same about their emotional health. Just 15% feel these have improved.
- 2) Those worried about COVID-19 are more likely to have felt a lack of companionship (21% vs. 9%) and social isolation (21% vs. 7%) over the past four weeks.
- 3) They also are less likely to describe their quality of life (47% vs. 63%), mental health (50% vs. 66%), and social relationships (37% vs. 52%) as excellent or very good.

To cope with isolation, older adults are using video chat and social media more often since the beginning of the pandemic as the frequency of activities like visiting with friends and family in person, doing volunteer work, attending religious services, and talking with neighbors have declined. And despite struggles with mental health and isolation, more report that their use of mental health services has declined (34%) than increased (6%).

In addition to the increasing use of technology to socialize, more older adults are using video chat, email, and other technology to receive health care remotely. Sixty-three percent have used telehealth at some point during the pandemic, up from 56% who had used it as of March 2021. Fifty-one percent of users expect to continue using it once the pandemic is over, too.

Still, adults age 50 and older are more optimistic than pessimistic that they will be able to fully return to their pre-pandemic activities in the next year, though 17% have already done so.

The AP-NORC Center conducted this study with funding from The SCAN Foundation. The survey includes 1,015 interviews with a nationally representative sample of adults age 50 and older living in America using the Foresight 50+ Panel, the probability-based panel of adults age 50 and older of NORC at the University of Chicago. Interviews were conducted between August 20 and 23, 2021, via web and phone in English. The margin of sampling error is +/- 4.1 percentage points.

Other key findings include:

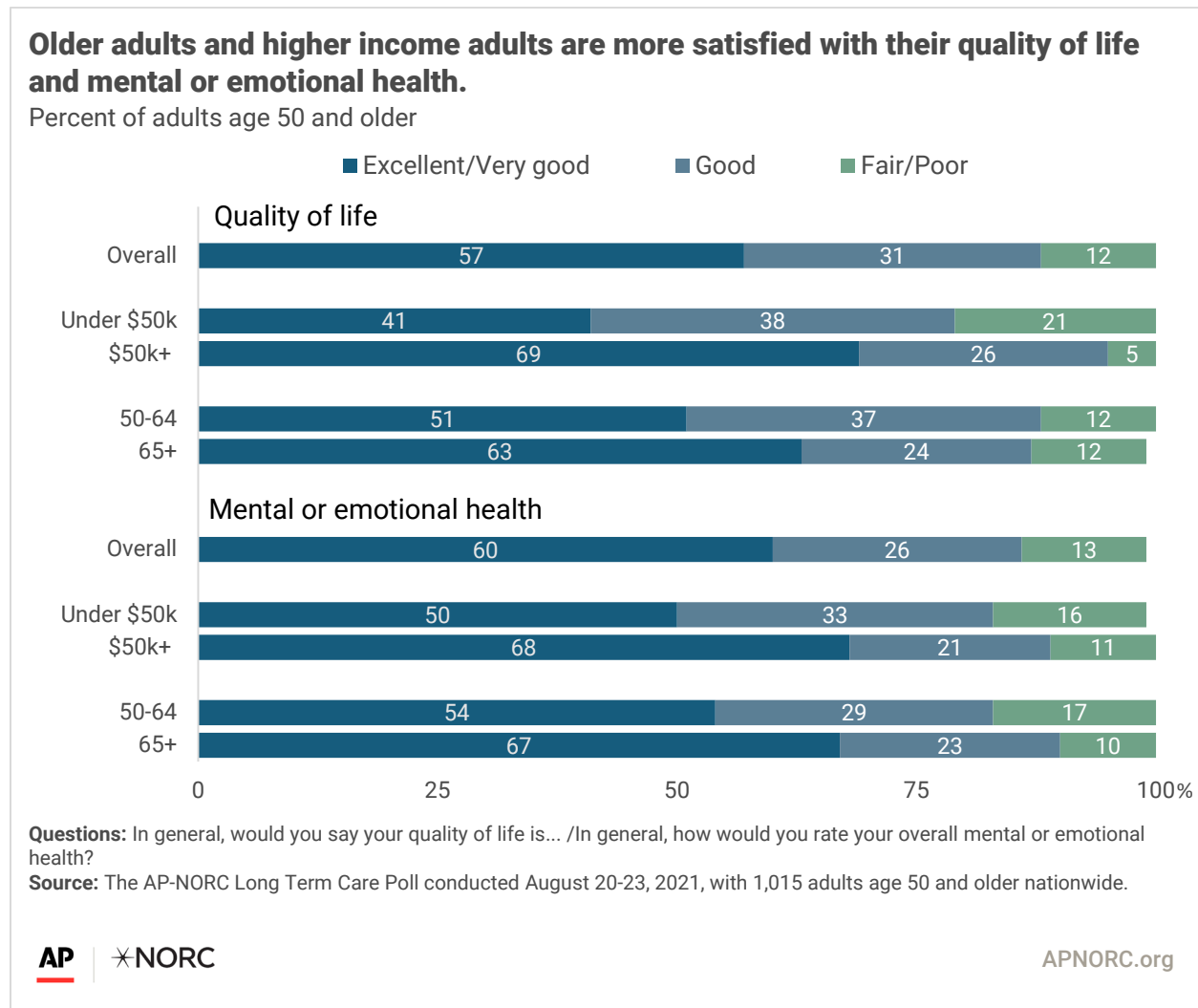
- 57% of adults age 50 and older rate their quality of life as very good or excellent, 31% rate it as good, and 12% as fair or poor.
- 60% rate their mental or emotional health as very good or excellent, 26% as good, and 13% as fair or poor.
- Those in households earning over \$50,000 are more likely than those in households earning less report better quality of life (69% vs. 41%) and mental or emotional health (68% vs. 50%).
- 62% have rarely or never felt they lacked companionship over the past four weeks, but 24% have felt that way sometimes, and 13% felt that way often or very often.
- Similarly, 64% have rarely or never felt isolated from others, but 22% have felt isolated sometimes, and 12% often or very often.
- 43% report using video chat software more often since the beginning of the pandemic, and 33% use social media more often.
- 63% have used telehealth since the start of the pandemic, up from 56% in March 2021.
- Fifty-one percent of those who have used telehealth are at least somewhat likely to continue using it once the pandemic is over.
- 36% are very or extremely worried about themselves or someone in their household being infected with COVID-19, an increase from 17% in June and 27% in July. Those who have received at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine are more worried about infection than those who have not (40% vs. 22%).
- Vaccinated adults age 50 and older are also more likely to stay away from large groups (67% vs. 47%), wear a face mask around other people outside their home (65% vs. 38%), and avoid nonessential travel (59% vs. 34%).
- 26% of those vaccinated feel that their mental and emotional health has gotten worse over the past year compared to just 12% of those who have not been vaccinated.

## A THIRD OF ADULTS AGE 50 AND OLDER FEEL SOCIALLY ISOLATED AT LEAST SOME OF THE TIME.

Nearly 18 months into the COVID-19 pandemic, 57% of adults age 50 and older rate their overall quality of life as excellent or very good, and 31% rate it as good. But, 12% of adults age 50 and older rate their quality of life as fair or poor. These numbers remain similar compared to last summer.<sup>1</sup>

And when it comes to mental or emotional health, 60% describe theirs as excellent or very good and 26% describe theirs as good. Still, 13% rate it is fair or poor.

Those age 65 and older and those earning \$50,000 or more report better mental or emotional health and general quality of life.



Most adults 50 and older are satisfied with their social activities and relationships. Forty-seven percent rate their satisfaction as excellent or very good, and 29% as good. However, nearly a quarter (24%) rate their social activities and relationships as fair or poor. These rates are similar to measures from spring and summer 2020.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.norc.org/Research/Projects/Pages/covid-response-tracking-study.aspx>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.norc.org/Research/Projects/Pages/covid-response-tracking-study.aspx>.

Again, differences emerge by income, with lower-income adults age 50 and older less satisfied. Just 36 percent of those making less than \$50,000 rate their social satisfaction as excellent or very good compared to 55% of those making \$50,000 or more who say the same.

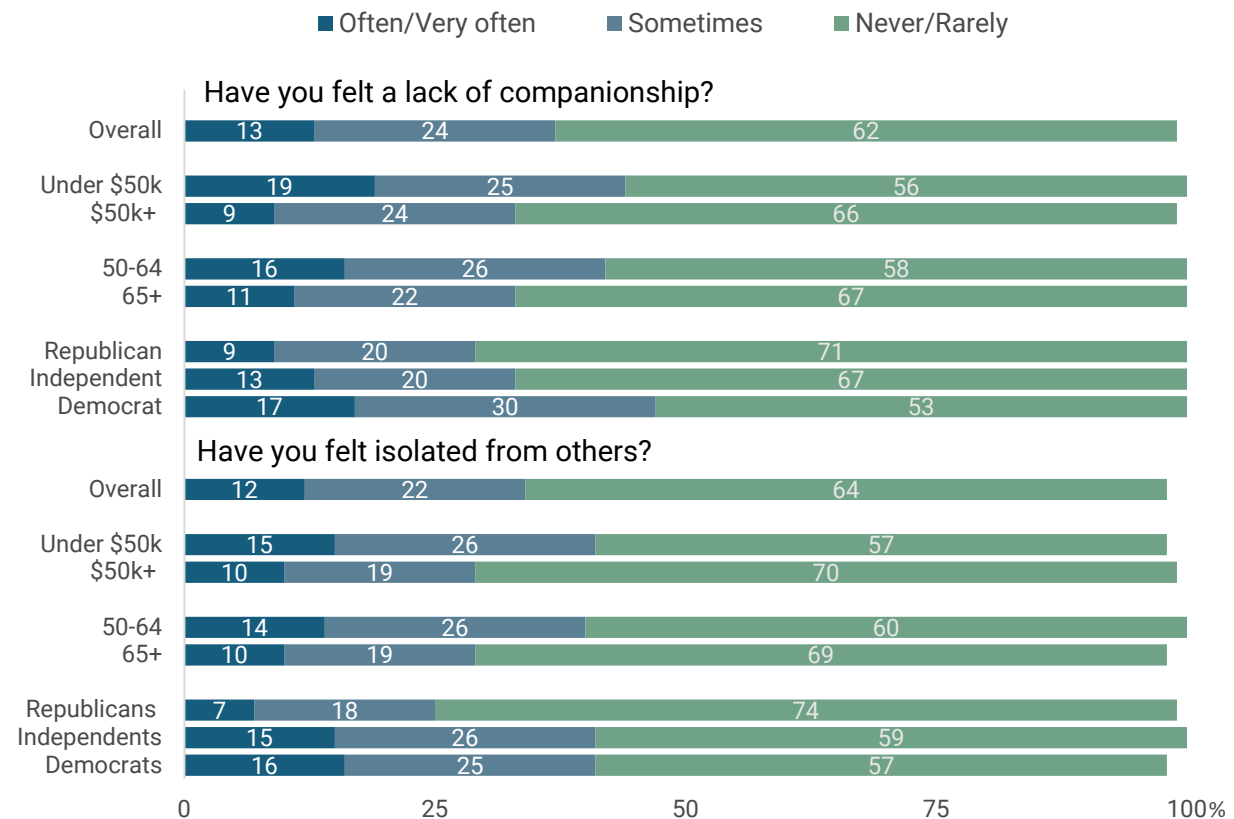
Loneliness and isolation are even more prevalent. More than a third of adults age 50 and older feel they lack companionship at least sometimes, including 13% who have felt this way often or very often in the past four weeks. Similar numbers have felt isolated from others during the same timeframe.

Isolation among adults age 50 and older has decreased since May 2020, when 54% said they never or rarely felt isolated. Rates of those reporting a lack of companionship have remained about the same.

Adults age 65 and older, earning \$50,000 or more, and Republicans are all more likely to say they rarely or never have felt isolated or lacking companionship recently.

## Older adults, higher income adults, and Republicans have felt lonely less often than younger or lower income adults and Democrats.

Percent of adults age 50 and older



**Questions:** How often in the past 4 weeks have you felt that you lack companionship?/How often in the past 4 weeks have you felt isolated from others?

**Source:** The AP-NORC Long Term Care Poll conducted August 20-23, 2021, with 1,015 adults age 50 and older nationwide.

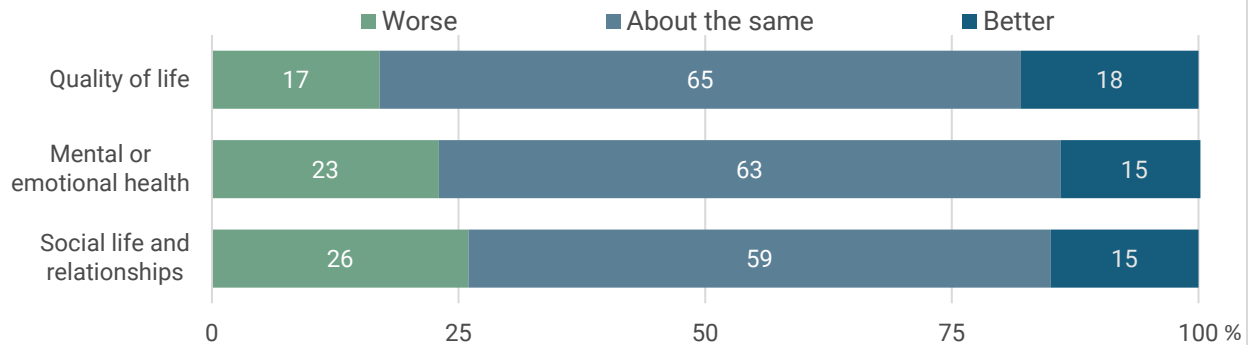
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Over the past year, most report that their quality of life, mental or emotional health, and social life and relationships have stayed about the same. And while similar numbers say that their quality of life has improved and declined, more say their mental health and social relationships have gotten worse than say they have gotten better. Social life and relationships, in particular, have taken a hit, with 26% saying they have gotten worse in the past year. Democrats are more likely to feel that their social life and relationships have gotten worse than Republicans (30% vs. 20%).

## Most feel that their quality of life, mental health, and social life and relationships have remained about the same over the past year.

Percent of adults age 50 and older



**Questions:** Over the past year, would you say each of the following has gotten better, gotten worse, or stayed about the same?

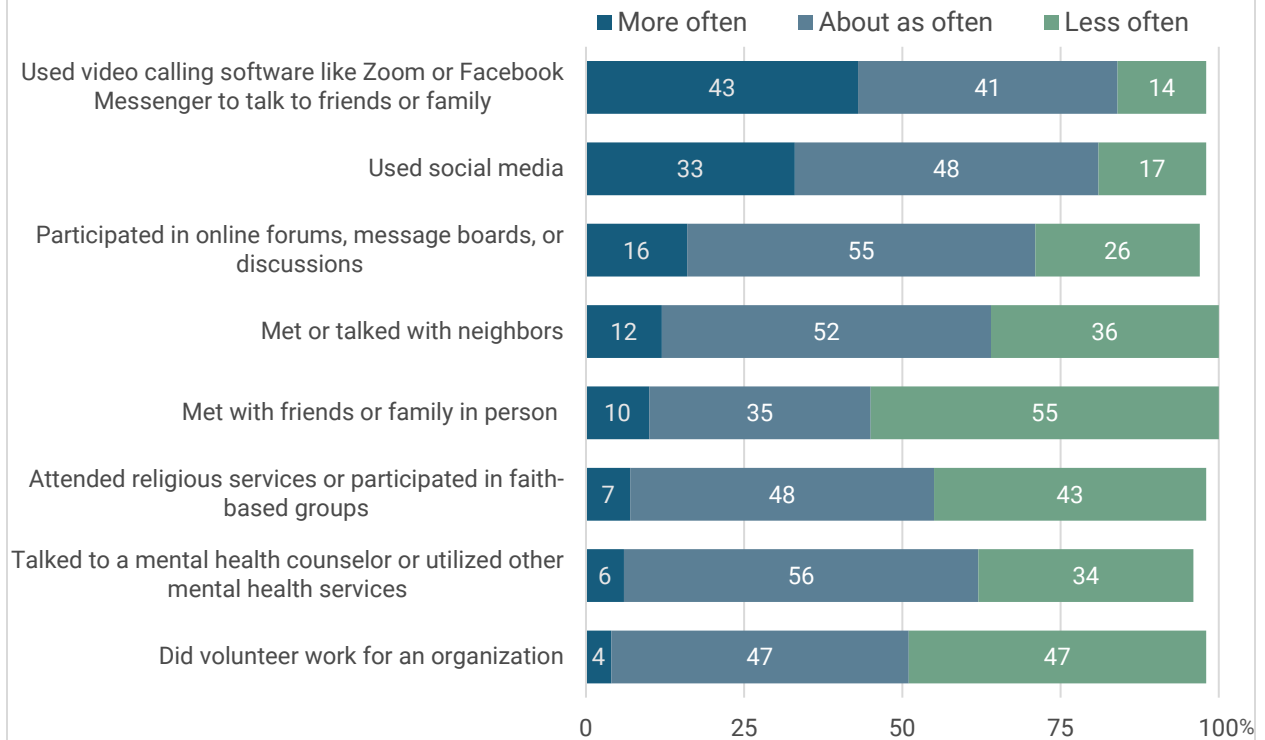
**Source:** The AP-NORC Long Term Care Poll conducted August 20-23, 2021, with 1,015 adults age 50 and older nationwide.

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To cope with isolation, 43% report using video chat software more often since the beginning of the pandemic, and 33% say they are using social media more often. But the pandemic has caused some activities to become less frequent. Despite significant shares of those age 50 and older experiencing difficulties with mental health and isolation, 34% are talking to mental health counselors and utilizing other mental health services less frequently than before the pandemic. Additionally, fewer are talking to neighbors (36%), doing volunteer work (47%), meeting with family and friends in person (55%), attending religious services (43%), and participating in online forums or message boards (26%).

## Most adults age 50 and older are interacting less frequently in-person since the beginning of the pandemic.



**Question:** Since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, have you done each of the following more often, less often, or about as often as before?

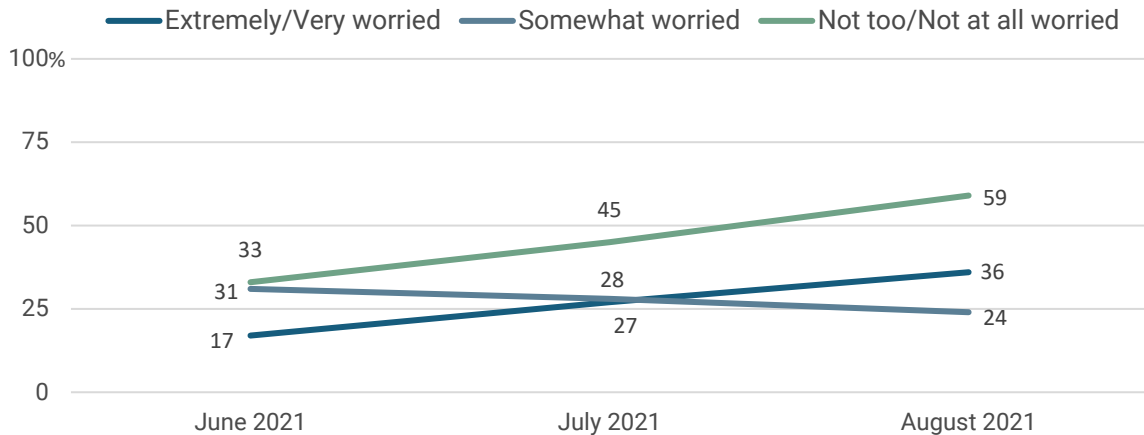
**Source:** The AP-NORC Long Term Care Poll conducted August 20-23, 2021, with 1,015 adults age 50 and older nationwide.

## MORE THAN A THIRD OF ADULTS AGE 50 AND OLDER ARE STILL VERY WORRIED ABOUT COVID-19 AND ARE PRACTICING SOCIAL DISTANCING MUCH OF THE TIME.

As the Delta variant continues to surge, worries about COVID-19 ticked up over the summer. Just 17% of adults age 50 and older were extremely or very worried about COVID-19 in June, which increased to 27% in July. But now, 36% percent are extremely or very worried about themselves or someone in their family being infected with COVID-19. Just 14% say the same about the flu.

### Worries about COVID-19 have increased over the summer.

Percent of adults age 50 and older



**Questions:** How worried are you about you or someone in your family being infected with ...The coronavirus?

**Source:** The AP-NORC Long Term Care Poll conducted August 20-23, 2021, with 1,015 adults age 50 and older nationwide; AP-NORC Poll conducted July 15-19, 2021, with 632 adults age 50 and older nationwide; and AP-NORC Poll conducted June 10-14, 2021, with 525 adults age 50 and older nationwide.

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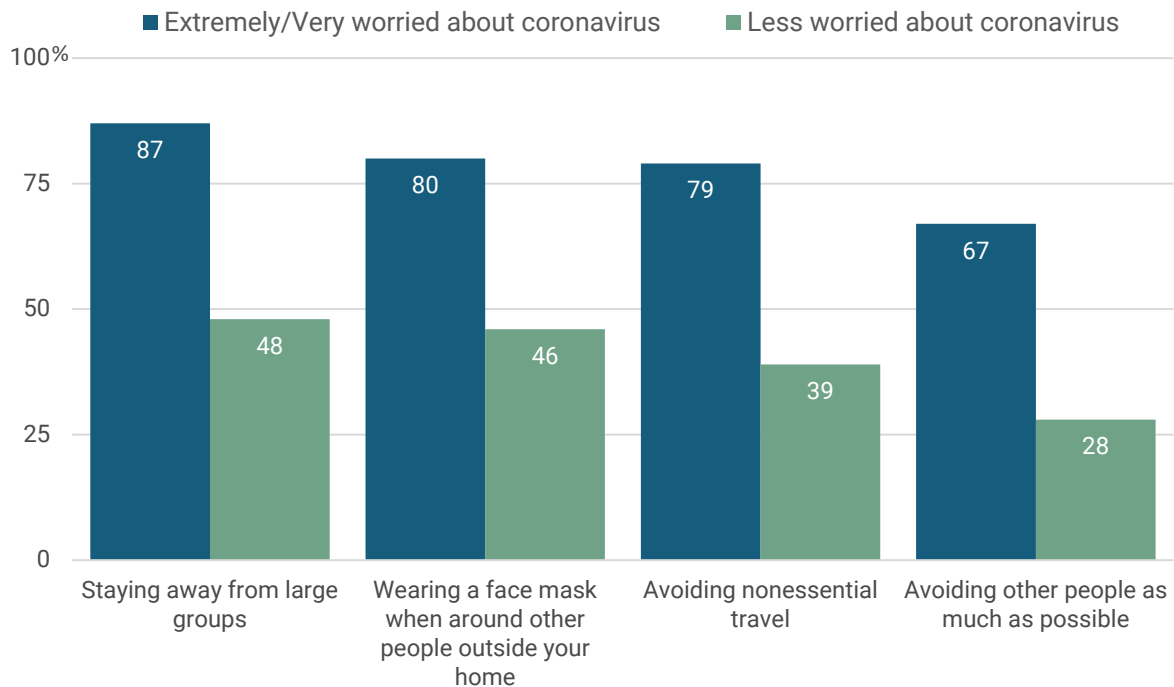
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Those who are very or extremely concerned about COVID-19 are more likely to take social distancing precautions like staying away from large groups, wearing a mask when around other people outside their homes, avoiding nonessential travel, and avoiding other people as much as possible.



## Those most worried about infection are more likely to take social distancing precautions.

Percent of adults age 50 and older who say they always or often do each



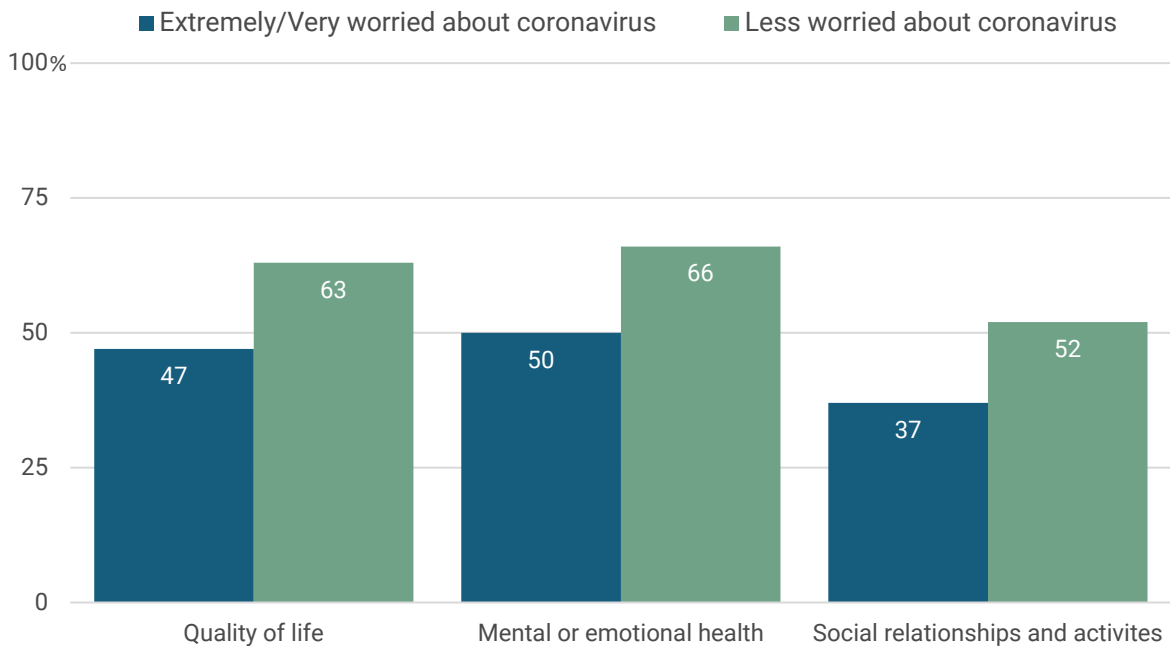
**Questions:** Because of the coronavirus pandemic, how often are you...?

**Source:** The AP-NORC Long Term Care Poll conducted August 20-23, 2021, with 1,015 adults age 50 and older nationwide.

They also rate their satisfaction with their quality of life, mental health, and social activities lower than those less concerned about infection. And among those less concerned about COVID, just 9% have felt they lacked companionship and 7% have felt isolated, while 21% of more worried individuals have felt the same for each measure.

## Adults who are more worried about COVID are less satisfied with their quality of life.

Percent of adults age 50 and older who rate each as very good or excellent



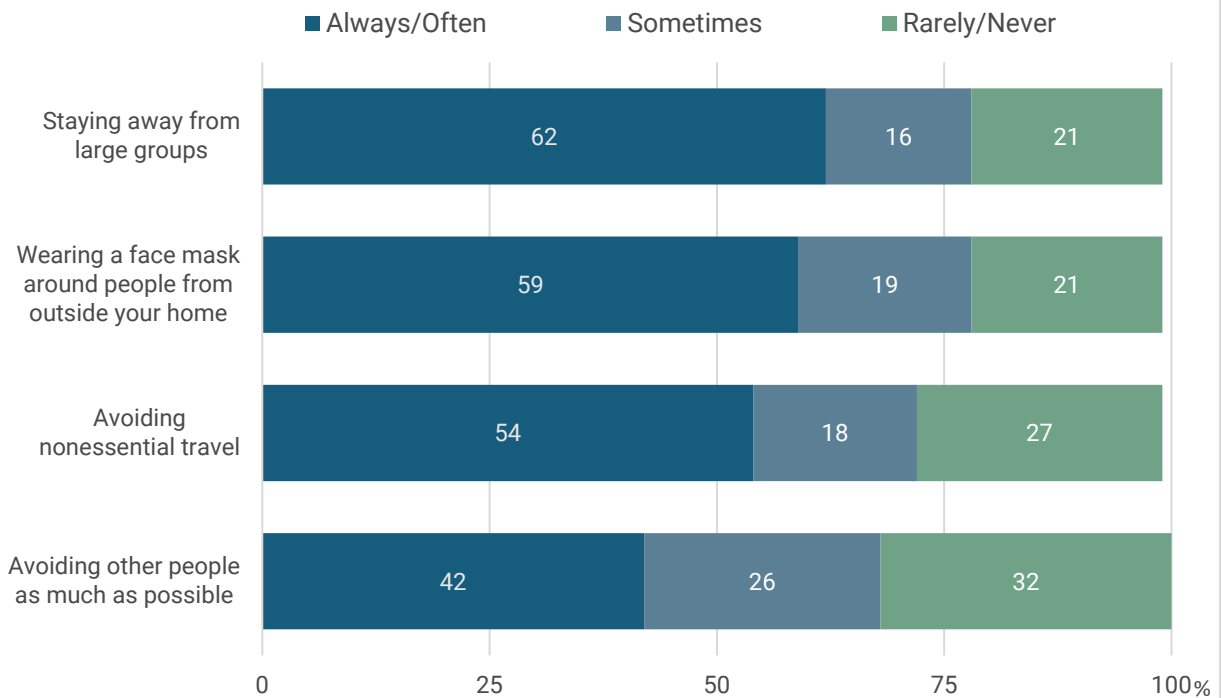
**Questions:** In general, would you say your quality of life is... /In general, how would you rate your overall mental or emotional health?/In general, how would you rate your satisfaction with your social activities and relationships?

**Source:** The AP-NORC Long Term Care Poll conducted August 20-23, 2021, with 1,015 adults age 50 and older nationwide.

Because of the coronavirus pandemic, 62% of adults age 50 and older often or always avoid large groups, 59% wear a mask around other people outside their home, and 54% avoid nonessential travel. Forty-two percent avoid other people as much as possible.

## Majorities are taking precautions due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Percent of adults age 50 and older



**Questions:** Because of the coronavirus pandemic, how often are you...?

**Source:** The AP-NORC Long Term Care Poll conducted August 20-23, 2021, with 1,015 adults age 50 and older nationwide.

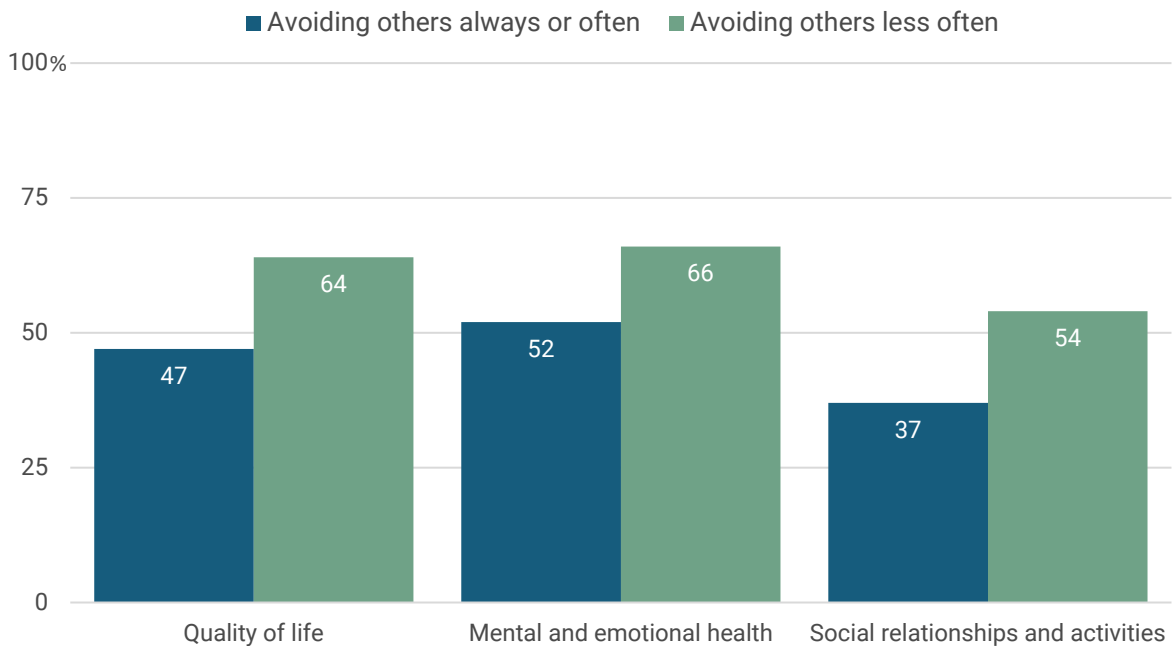
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Those avoiding others due to the coronavirus pandemic also rate their quality of life, mental health, and social activities lower than those who are not. And they are more likely to have felt they lacked companionship (19% vs. 9%) and to have felt isolated from others (19% vs. 7%).

### Adults who are avoiding others are less satisfied with their quality of life.

Percent of adults age 50 and older who rate each as very good or excellent



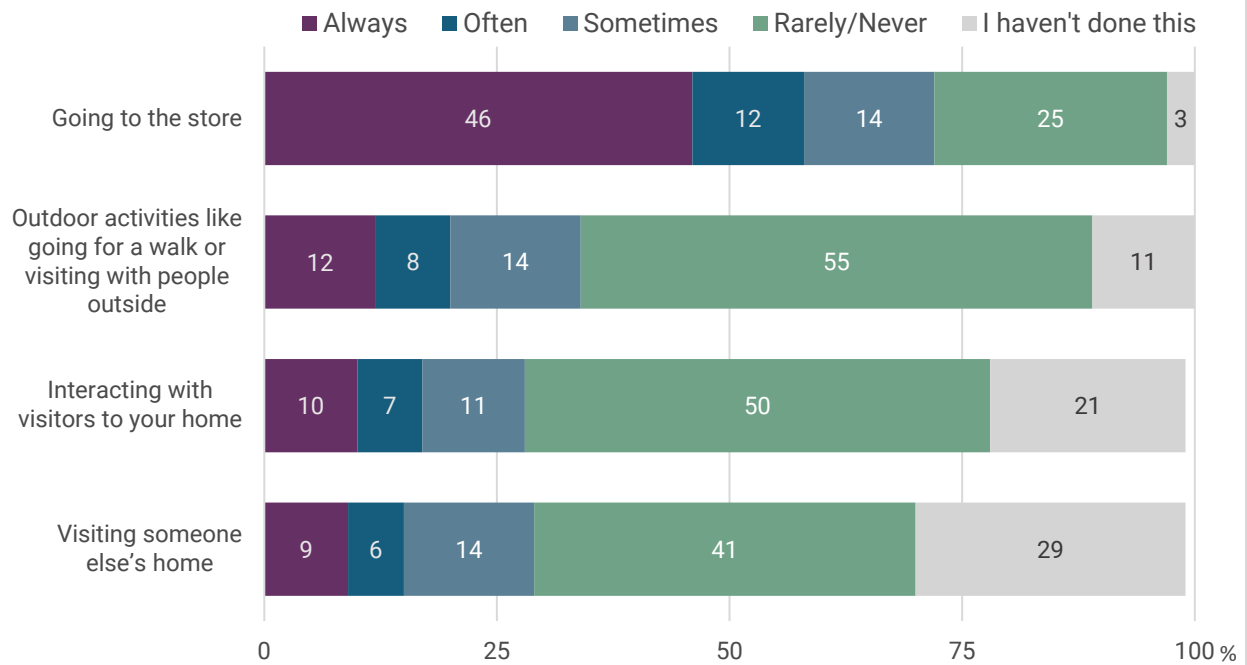
**Questions:** In general, would you say your quality of life is... / In general, how would you rate your overall mental or emotional health/In general, how would you rate your satisfaction with your social activities and relationships?

**Source:** The AP-NORC Long Term Care Poll conducted August 20-23, 2021, with 1,015 adults age 50 and older nationwide.

More than half of adults age 50 and older wear a mask when going to the store, including 46% who always do. Fewer wear masks when interacting with visitors in their own home or someone else's home or doing outdoor activities. However, 29% have not visited someone else's home, and 21% haven't had visitors to their own home in the past week.

## Majorities wear face masks when going to the store, but fewer do so during other activities.

Percent of adults age 50 and older

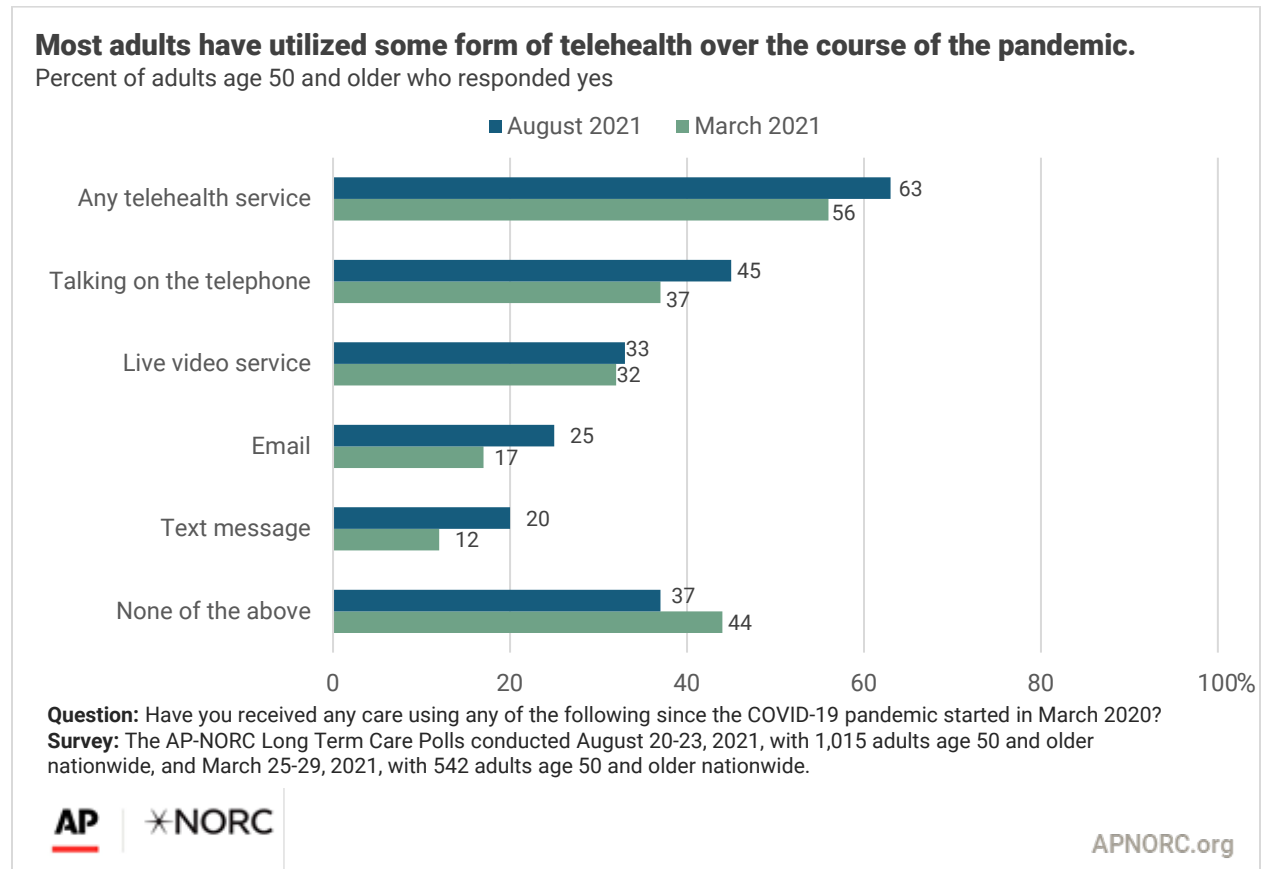


**Questions:** Over the past week, how often have you worn a mask while doing each of the following?

**Source:** The AP-NORC Long Term Care Poll conducted August 20-23, 2021, with 1,015 adults age 50 and older nationwide.

## NEARLY TWO-THIRDS OF ADULTS AGE 50 AND OLDER HAVE USED TELEHEALTH TO RECEIVE HEALTH CARE DURING THE PANDEMIC, AND MORE THAN HALF EXPECT TO CONTINUE DOING SO ONCE IT'S OVER.

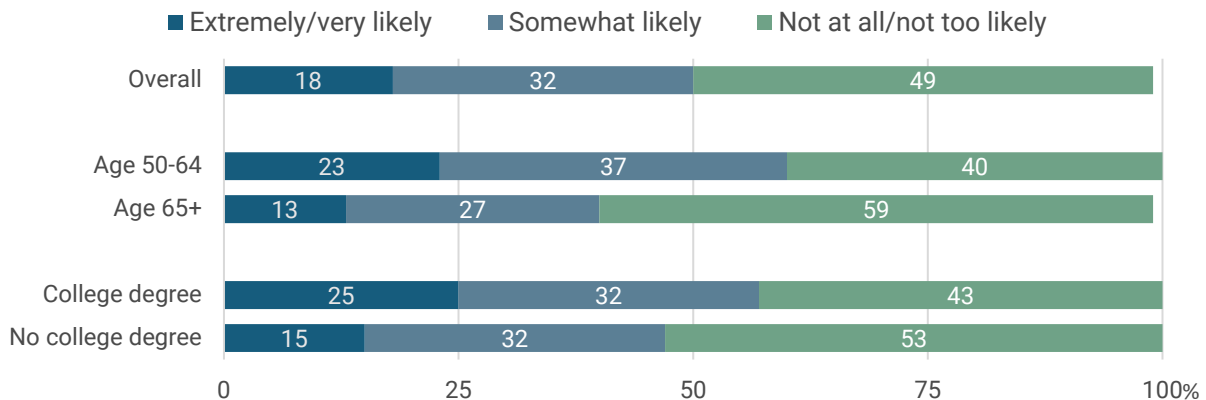
The number of adults age 50 and older who have used some form of telehealth—either telephone, live video, email, or text message—has increased in the late stages of the pandemic. Sixty-three percent report having used one of these, up from 56% in March of this year. Talking on the phone and live video are the most popular, though more have used email and text messages since March.



Fifty-one percent of those who have used telehealth are at least somewhat likely to continue doing so once the pandemic is over. Forty-nine percent are not too or not at all likely to continue doing so. Among those who have used telehealth services, those age 50-64 and those with a college degree are more likely to continue doing so than those age 65 and older and those without a degree, respectively.

### Users of telehealth age 50-64 and those with a college degree are more likely to continue using it after the pandemic.

Percent of adults age 50 and older who have used any type of telehealth since March 2020



**Questions:** Once the COVID-19 outbreak is over, how likely are you to continue to seek care through telehealth?

**Source:** The AP-NORC Long Term Care Poll conducted August 20-23, 2021, with 1,015 adults age 50 and older nationwide.

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### THOSE WHO ARE VACCINATED ARE MORE CONCERNED ABOUT COVID-19 INFECTION, ARE ACTING MORE CAUTIOUSLY, AND DESCRIBE DETERIORATING MENTAL HEALTH.

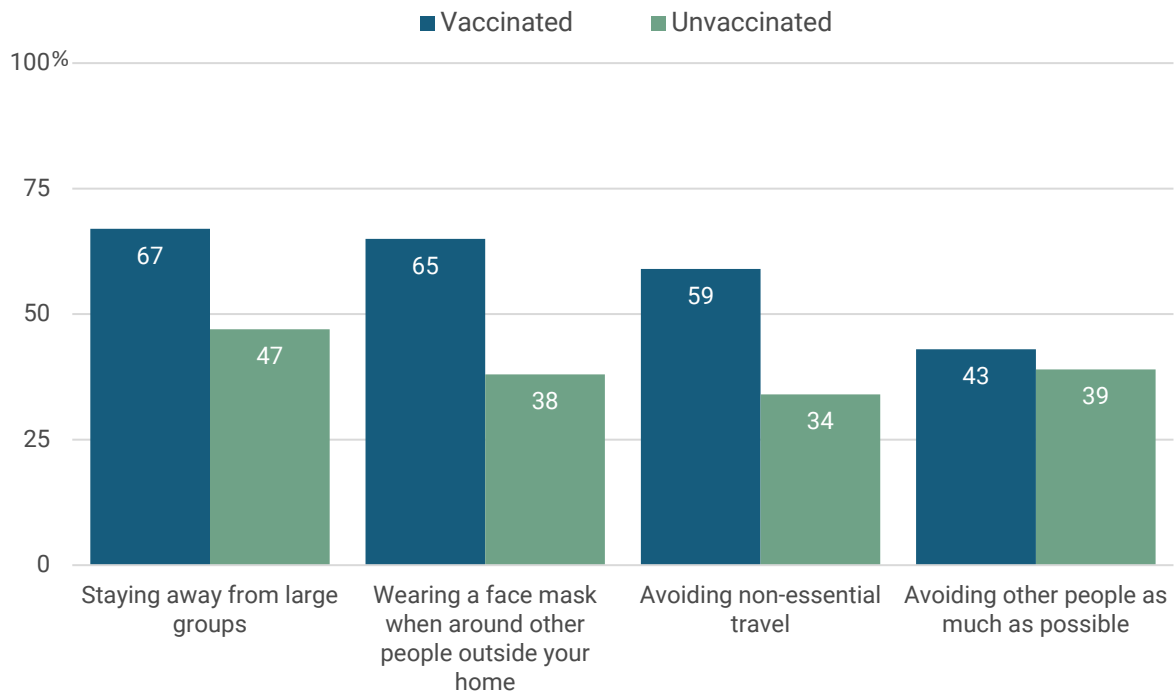
Vaccination has not provided older adults with a sense of relief about the virus or greater freedom to participate in activities.

Those who have received at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine are more worried about being infected than those who have not. Forty percent of those who have received at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine are still extremely or very worried compared to 22% of those who have not received the vaccine.

Vaccinated adults are also more likely to avoid nonessential travel, stay away from large groups, and wear a face mask around people from outside their home due to the pandemic. Vaccinated and unvaccinated adults are similarly likely to avoid people as much as possible.

**Vaccinated adults are more likely than unvaccinated adults to take precautions.**

Percent of adults age 50 and older who say always or often

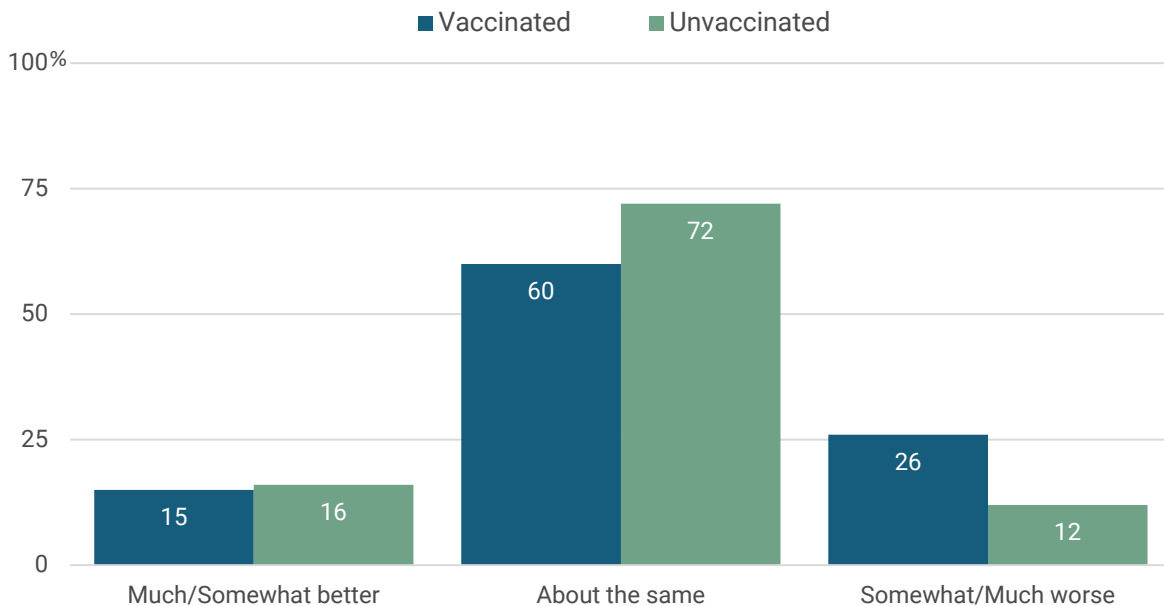
**Questions:** Because of the coronavirus pandemic, how often are you...?**Source:** The AP-NORC Long Term Care Poll conducted August 20-23, 2021, with 1,015 adults age 50 and older nationwide.

These measures to avoid the virus may be taking a toll on vaccinated people. Twenty-six percent of vaccinated individuals say their mental and emotional health has gotten worse over the past year compared to just 12% of unvaccinated people who say the same. Unvaccinated people are more likely than vaccinated people to say their mental health has stayed the same (72% vs. 60%).



## Vaccinated adults are more likely than unvaccinated adults to say their mental or emotional health has gotten worse.

Percent of adults age 50 and older



**Questions:** Over the past year, would you say each of the following has gotten better, gotten worse, or stayed about the same? Your mental or emotional health.

**Source:** The AP-NORC Long Term Care Poll conducted August 20-23, 2021, with 1,015 adults age 50 and older nationwide.



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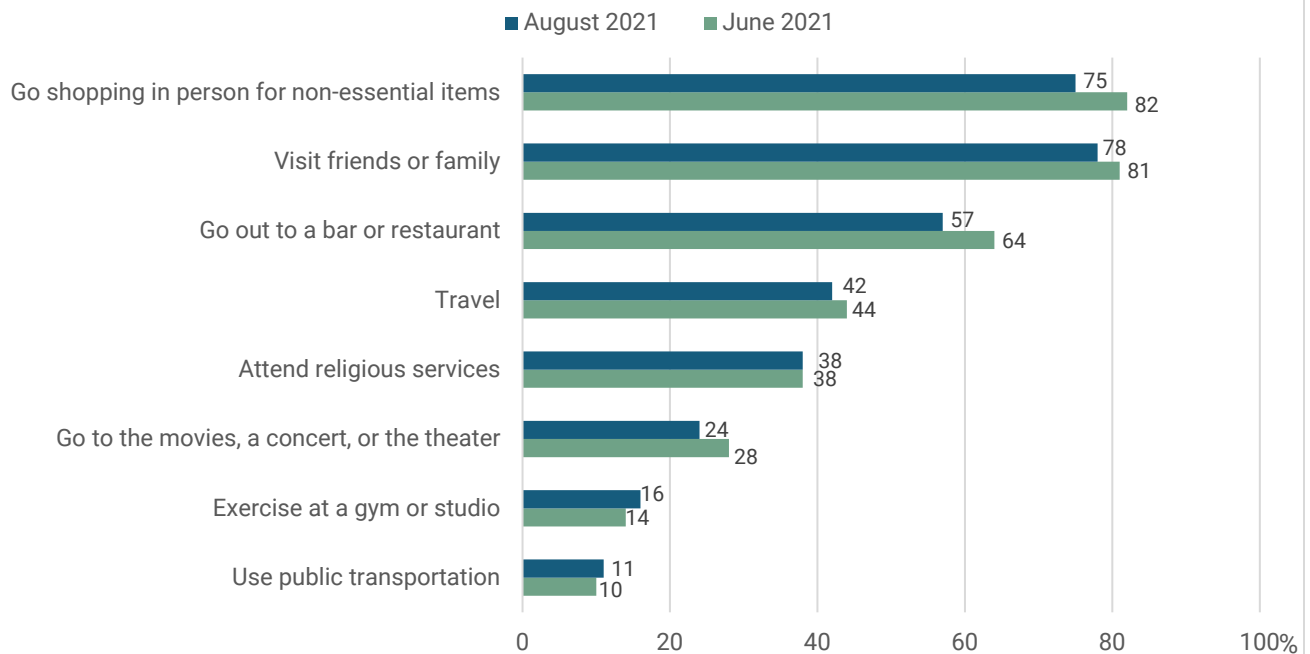
## EVEN WITH CASES ON THE RISE, ADULTS AGE 50 AND OLDER EXPECT TO DO THINGS LIKE VISIT FRIENDS AND FAMILY, GO TO BARS OR RESTAURANTS, AND DO OTHER ACTIVITIES AT RATES SIMILAR TO THOSE IN JUNE.

Despite the surge in COVID-19 cases driven by the Delta variant, the expectations of adults age 50 and older regarding their daily activities remain mostly unchanged since June 2021.<sup>3</sup> Visiting friends and family, shopping in person for nonessential items, and going out to bars and restaurants remain especially popular.

<sup>3</sup> AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. (June 2021). "Public Is Relaxing Its Pandemic Precautions." <https://apnorc.org/projects/public-is-relaxing-its-pandemic-precautions>.

### Despite rising cases, many adults' expectations have not changed.

Percent of adults age 50 and older who say definitely/probably yes



**Question:** In the next few weeks, will you personally:

**Source:** The AP-NORC Long Term Care Poll conducted August 20-23, 2021, with 1,015 adults age 50 and older nationwide, and the AP-NORC Poll conducted June 10-14, 2021, with 525 adults age 50 and older nationwide.

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However, there are differences in these trends based on vaccination status among those age 50 and older, with vaccinated people becoming less likely and unvaccinated people becoming more likely to expect to do certain activities. Compared to June, vaccinated people are less likely to expect to travel (down from 48% to 41%); go out to bars and restaurants (from 68% to 56%); and do nonessential shopping (from 84% to 75%). Yet, the number of unvaccinated people who expect to travel increased (from 34% to 46%), as did the number who expect to attend a religious service (up from 41% to 49%), and exercise at a gym or studio (up from 11% to 21%).

Overall, 42% percent of adults age 50 and older are optimistic that they will be able to return to their pre-pandemic activities in the next year, with 17% already having done so. Still, 24% are pessimistic that their activities will be back to normal even a year from now, and 16% are neither optimistic nor pessimistic.

## STUDY METHODOLOGY

This study, funded by [The SCAN Foundation](#), was conducted by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. Data were collected using the Foresight 50+ Consumer Omnibus, a monthly multi-client survey using NORC's probability-based panel designed to be representative of the U.S. household population of adults age 50 and older. The survey was part of a larger study that included questions about other topics not included in this report. During the initial recruitment phase of the panel, randomly selected U.S. households were sampled with a known, non-zero probability of selection from the NORC National Sample Frame or a secondary national address frame, both with over 97% coverage of all U.S. addresses, and then contacted by U.S. mail, email, telephone, or field interviewers (face to face). Households were screened for having at least one adult age 50 and older. The panel provides sample coverage of approximately 97% of the U.S. household population. Those excluded from the sample include people with P.O. Box only addresses, some addresses not listed in the USPS Delivery Sequence File, and some newly constructed dwellings population. Of note for this study, the panel would also exclude adults age 50 and older who live in some institutional types of settings, such as skilled nursing facilities or nursing homes, depending on how addresses are listed for the facility. Staff from NORC at the University of Chicago, The Associated Press, and The SCAN Foundation collaborated on all aspects of the study.

Interviews for this survey were conducted between August 20 and August 23, 2021, with adults age 50 and older representing the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Panel members were randomly drawn from the Foresight 50+ Panel, and 1,015 completed the survey—949 via the web and 66 via telephone. Interviews were conducted in English. Respondents were offered a small monetary incentive (\$3) for completing the survey.

The final stage completion rate is 16.0%, the weighted household panel recruitment rate is 19.1%, and the weighted household panel retention rate is 75%, for a cumulative response rate of 2.3%. The overall margin of sampling error is +/- 4.1 percentage points at the 95% confidence level, including the design effect.

Once the sample has been selected and fielded, and all the study data have been collected and made final, a poststratification process is used to adjust for any survey nonresponse as well as any non-coverage or under- and oversampling resulting from the study-specific sample design. Poststratification variables included age, gender, census division, race/ethnicity, education, and AARP Membership. Weighting variables were obtained from the 2021 Current Population Survey and AARP. The weighted data reflect the U.S. population of adults age 50 and over.

Topline data and reports are available at [www.longtermcarepoll.org](http://www.longtermcarepoll.org). For more information, email [info@apnorc.org](mailto:info@apnorc.org).

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## ABOUT THE SCAN FOUNDATION

The SCAN Foundation is an independent public charity dedicated to creating a society where older adults can access health and supportive services of their choosing to meet their needs. Our mission is to advance a coordinated and easily navigated system of high-quality services for older adults that preserves dignity and independence. For more information, visit [www.TheSCANFoundation.org](http://www.TheSCANFoundation.org).

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Celebrating its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year, The AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research taps into the power of social science research and the highest-quality journalism to bring key information to people across the nation and throughout the world.

- The Associated Press (AP) is an independent global news organization dedicated to factual reporting. Founded in 1846, AP today remains the most trusted source of fast, accurate, unbiased news in all formats and the essential provider of the technology and services vital to the news business. More than half the world's population sees AP journalism every day. [www.ap.org](http://www.ap.org)
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