

OBESITY IN AMERICA AMID THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC—NEW WORRIES, HOPES, AND STRATEGIES EMERGE FOR MILLIONS OF AMERICANS

COVID-19 has forever changed the way a large segment of the U.S. population thinks about obesity. Nearly a third of adults (29 percent) say the pandemic has made them more worried than ever about having obesity, and 14 percent of those trying to lose weight (or 6.4 million Americans) considered getting weight-loss surgery or using anti-obesity prescription drugs for the first time during the pandemic. Almost 40 percent say the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to their decision to lose weight, and more than two-thirds (64 percent) say it has made them pay more attention to their overall health.

The findings come from a nationwide poll of 1,714 adults that was conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago for the American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery (ASMBS) from December 10-28, 2021, about two years into the COVID-19 pandemic and five years after the two nonprofits did their first national survey on the American public's perception of obesity as a public health threat.



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Three Things You Should Know

about the ASMBS and NORC Survey on Obesity Among American Adults...

- 1) As a result of COVID-19, 38 percent now see obesity as being a larger risk to a person's overall health than prior to the pandemic.
- 2) Thirty-nine percent of adults who have tried to lose weight in the last year or are currently trying to lose weight cited COVID-19 as a reason for doing so this year.
- 3) Fourteen percent (6.4 million Americans) who tried to lose weight in the last year or are currently trying considered having weight-loss surgery or using prescription medications for the first time during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Obesity, which affects 42.4 percent of Americans,¹ is a major risk factor for severe outcomes from COVID-19, including hospitalization and death. Obesity can weaken the immune system and cause chronic inflammation. It also increases the risk for cardiovascular disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, certain cancers, and many other diseases.

The dangers of obesity and its link to other diseases and early death are clearly understood by the American public and are a larger cause for concern than COVID-19 even amid the pandemic. The overwhelming majority of Americans (82 percent) say obesity is a serious health threat, tied only with cancer (82 percent), and followed by heart disease (77 percent), diabetes (76 percent), and COVID-19 (68 percent). Only Black Americans considered COVID-19 more dangerous than obesity (87 percent vs. 81 percent), cancer (87 percent vs. 85 percent), and heart disease (87 percent vs. 83 percent).

COVID-19 PROVIDES NEW MOTIVATION TO COMBAT OBESITY

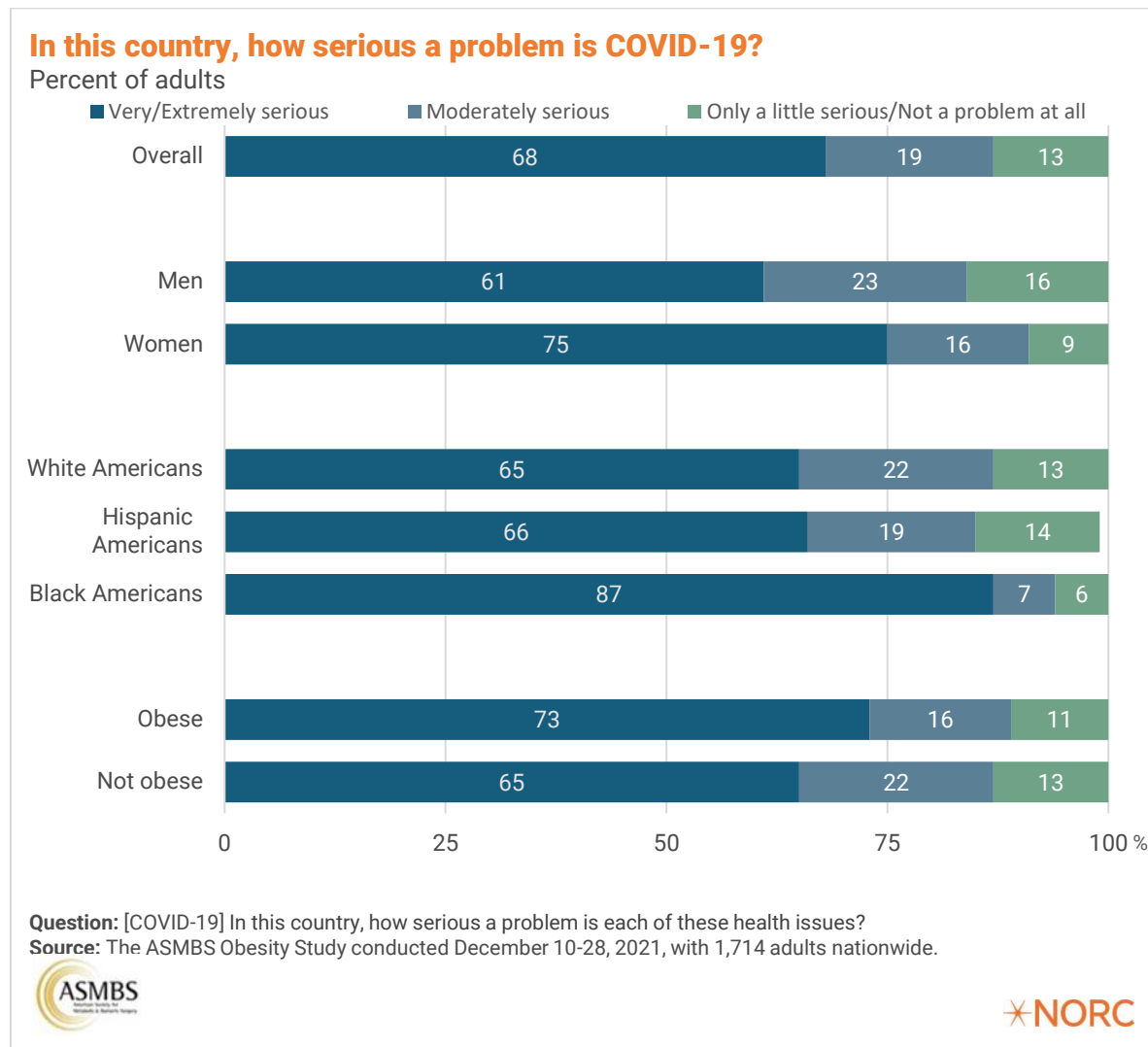
More than four in ten Americans (43 percent) say they tried to lose weight this past year and 39 percent of those currently trying or who tried to lose weight in the past year cited the pandemic as a source of their inspiration. Most relied on diet and exercise alone (65 percent), but 14 percent considered having weight-loss surgery for the first time. This finding is particularly notable because only about 1 percent of eligible patients undergo weight-loss surgery in any given year.² Weight-loss surgery was also perceived to have a lower risk for death than COVID-19 (19 percent vs. 39 percent who say high risk).

OBESITY CONSIDERED MORE SERIOUS THAN COVID-19

After two years of living through the pandemic, 68 percent of Americans consider COVID-19 a serious problem in the United States, and another 19 percent consider it moderately serious. Those with obesity view COVID-19 as an even bigger problem (73 percent), as do women (75 percent) and Black Americans (87 percent).

¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/adult.html>

² <https://asmbs.org/resources/access-to-care-fact-sheet>

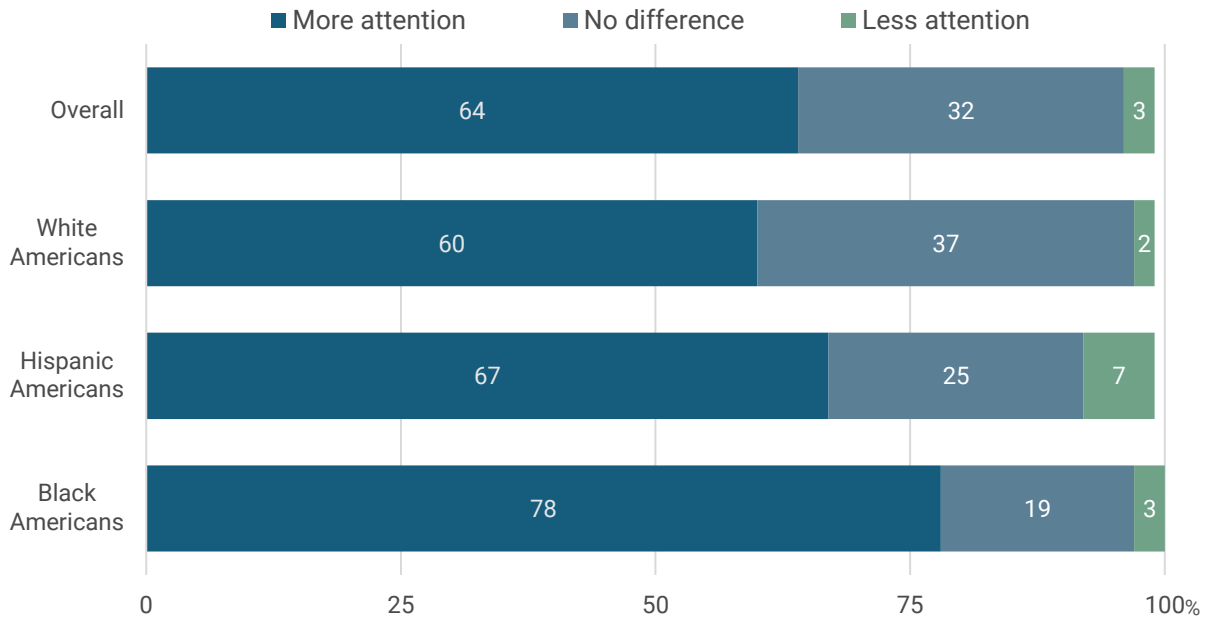


AMERICANS MORE FOCUSED ON THEIR OWN HEALTH

The pandemic has led many Americans to become more health conscious. Sixty-four percent of Americans say that, because of COVID-19, they are paying more attention to their overall health. Black Americans are more likely to pay more attention to their overall health (78 percent) than Hispanic (67) or white adults (60 percent), who are paying the least attention since the pandemic.

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, are you paying more or less attention to your overall health?

Percent of adults



Question: As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, are you paying more or less attention to your overall health?

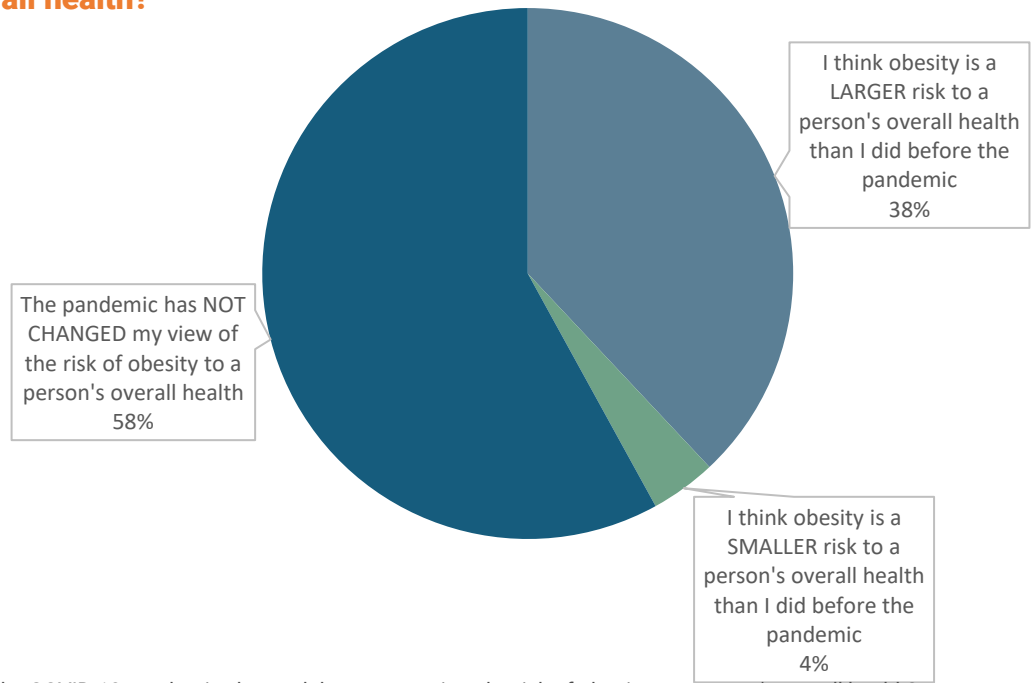
Source: The ASMBS Obesity Study conducted December 10-28, 2021, with 1,714 adults nationwide.



CHANGING VIEWS ON RISKS OF OBESITY

This new health consciousness sparked by the pandemic has led some Americans to reevaluate the risk of obesity to a person’s overall health. Thirty-eight percent of Americans now believe obesity is a larger risk to one’s overall health than it was before COVID-19. Just 4 percent think it is smaller, while most people (58 percent) say their view on the risk has not changed. Hispanic adults report that obesity has become a larger concern more often than white adults (48 percent vs. 35 percent).

How has the COVID-19 pandemic changed the way you view the risk of obesity to a person's overall health?



Question: How has the COVID-19 pandemic changed the way you view the risk of obesity to a person's overall health?

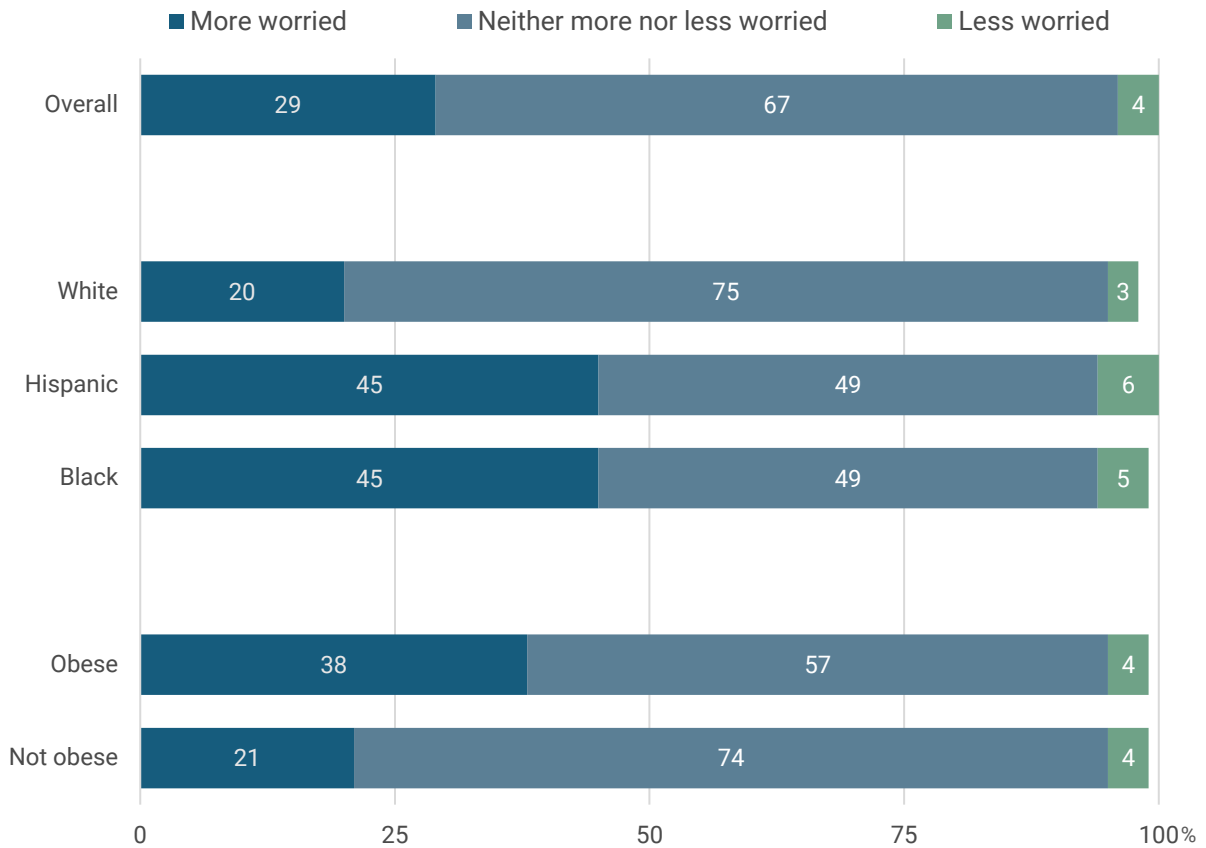
Source: The ASMBS Obesity Study conducted December 10-28, 2021, with 1,714 adults nationwide.



The pandemic also led to personal worry surrounding obesity. Three in ten (29 percent) reported being more worried than ever about having obesity. Those with obesity (38 percent) tended to have more worry than those without obesity (21 percent).

Has the COVID-19 pandemic made you more or less worried than you have ever been about having obesity?

Percent of adults



Question: Now what about you personally? Has the COVID-19 pandemic made you less worried than you have ever been about having obesity, more worried than you have ever been about having obesity, neither more or less worried than you have ever been about having obesity.

Source: The ASMBS Obesity Study conducted December 10-28, 2021, with 1,714 adults nationwide.



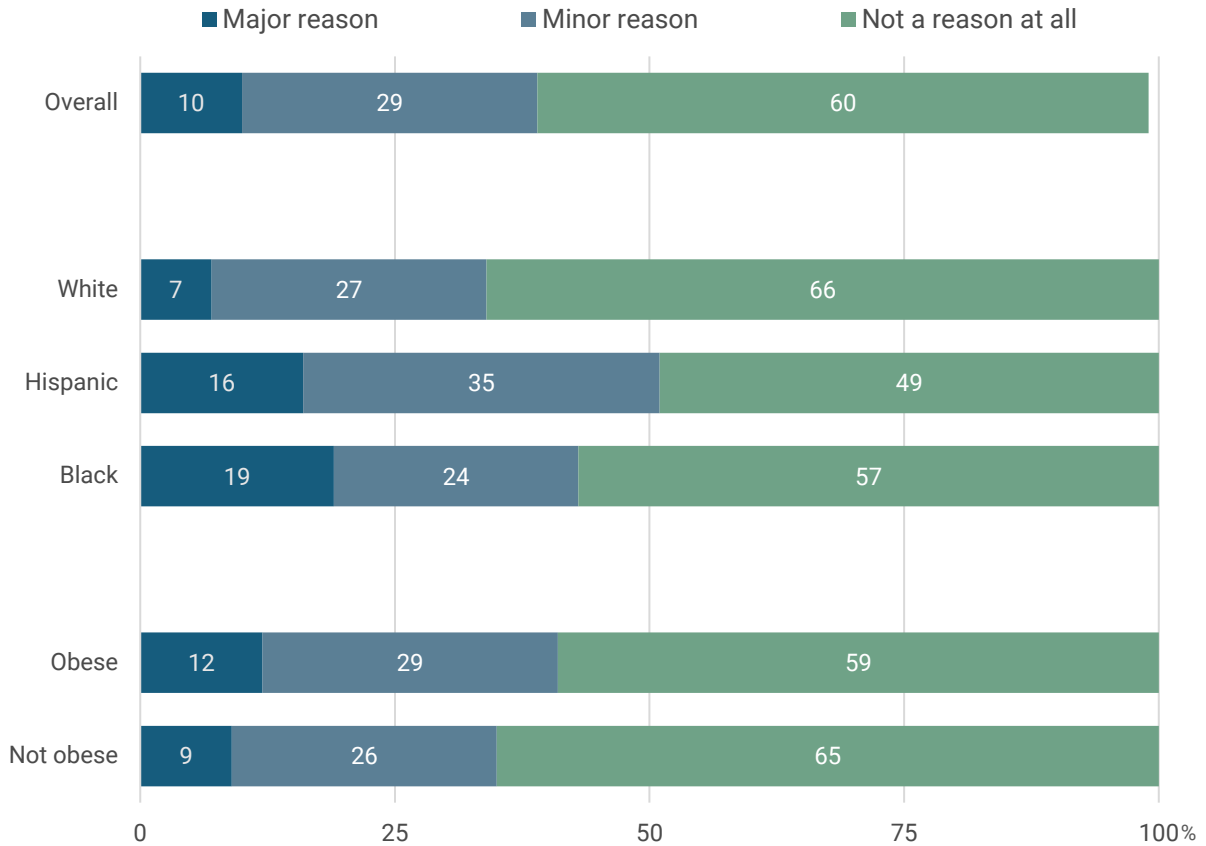
COVID-19 SPARKS NEW ATTEMPTS AT WEIGHT LOSS

As the pandemic has raised concerns about the impact of obesity on health (and COVID-19 outcomes specifically), many Americans are trying to lose weight as a result. Three quarters (76 percent) of Americans have ever tried to lose weight, including 58 percent who are currently trying to lose weight. Among those currently trying to lose weight or who have tried to lose weight in the last year, 39 percent say the COVID-19 pandemic was a reason for trying to lose weight in 2021.

Fifty-one percent of Hispanic Americans cited concerns about COVID-19 as at least a minor reason for trying to lose weight, compared to about a third (34 percent) of white Americans. And Americans with obesity (41 percent) were more likely than those without (35 percent) to cite the COVID-19 pandemic as a reason for trying to lose weight.

Was the COVID-19 pandemic a major reason, minor reason, or not a reason at all for trying to lose weight this year?

Percent of adults who are currently trying to lose weight or have tried to lose weight in the last year



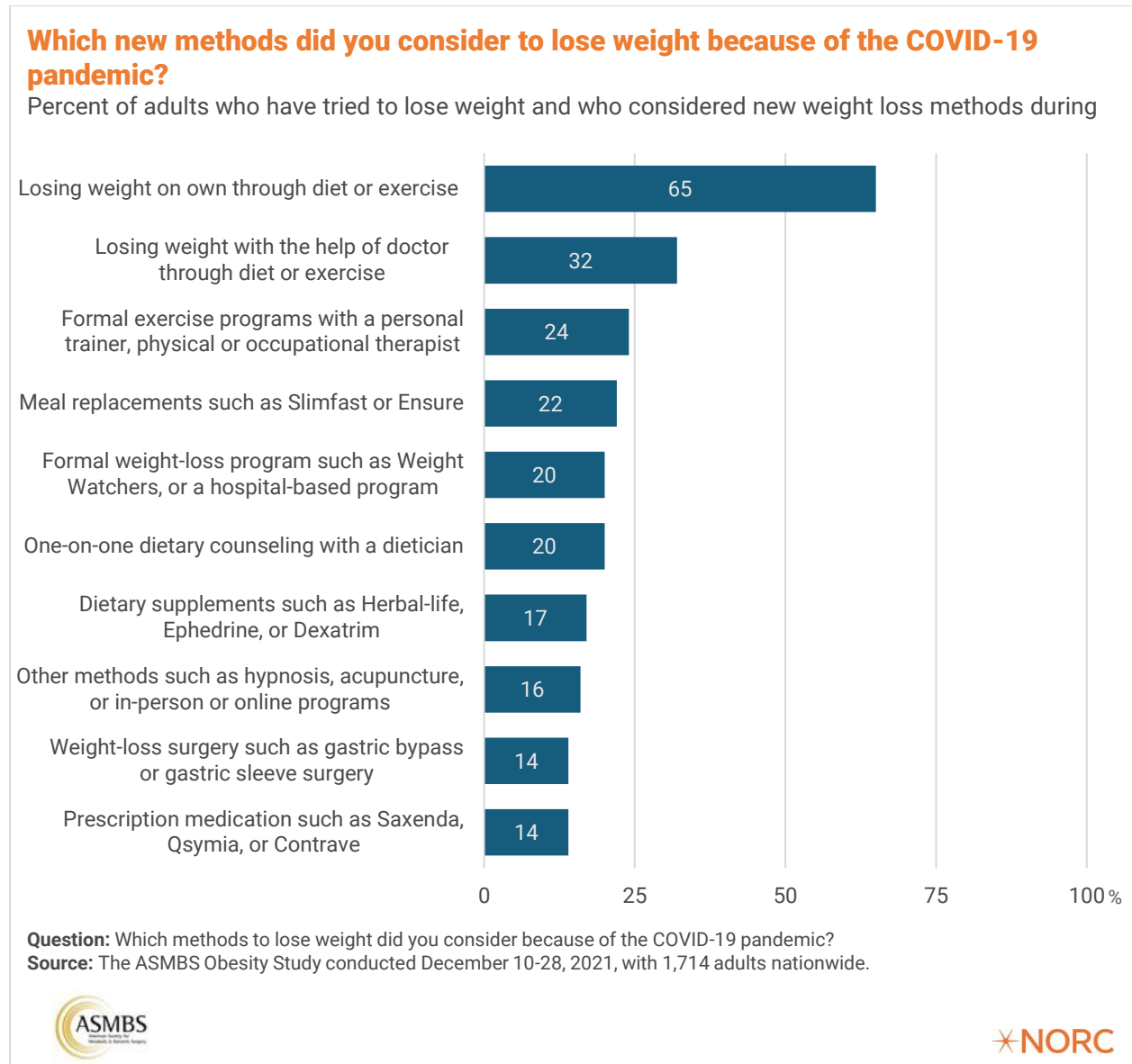
Question: Was the COVID-19 pandemic a major reason, minor reason, or not a reason at all for trying to lose weight this year?
Source: The ASMBS Obesity Study conducted December 10-28, 2021, with 1,714 adults nationwide.



Of those currently trying to lose weight and those who have tried to lose weight in the last year, just 19 percent have considered methods they had not tried before the pandemic. This is consistent across most groups, including men and women, and adults with and without obesity. There is one difference based on race and ethnicity, with 28 percent of Hispanic Americans having considered new methods to try to lose weight, compared to 15 percent of white Americans.

Among Americans who considered new methods to try to lose weight during the pandemic, the most popular method was dieting or exercising on their own (65 percent), followed by diet or exercise with the help of a doctor (32 percent), and formal exercise programs with a personal trainer, physical therapist, or occupational therapist (24 percent). Fourteen percent of Americans who considered new

methods to try to lose weight considered weight-loss surgery such as gastric bypass or a gastric sleeve.

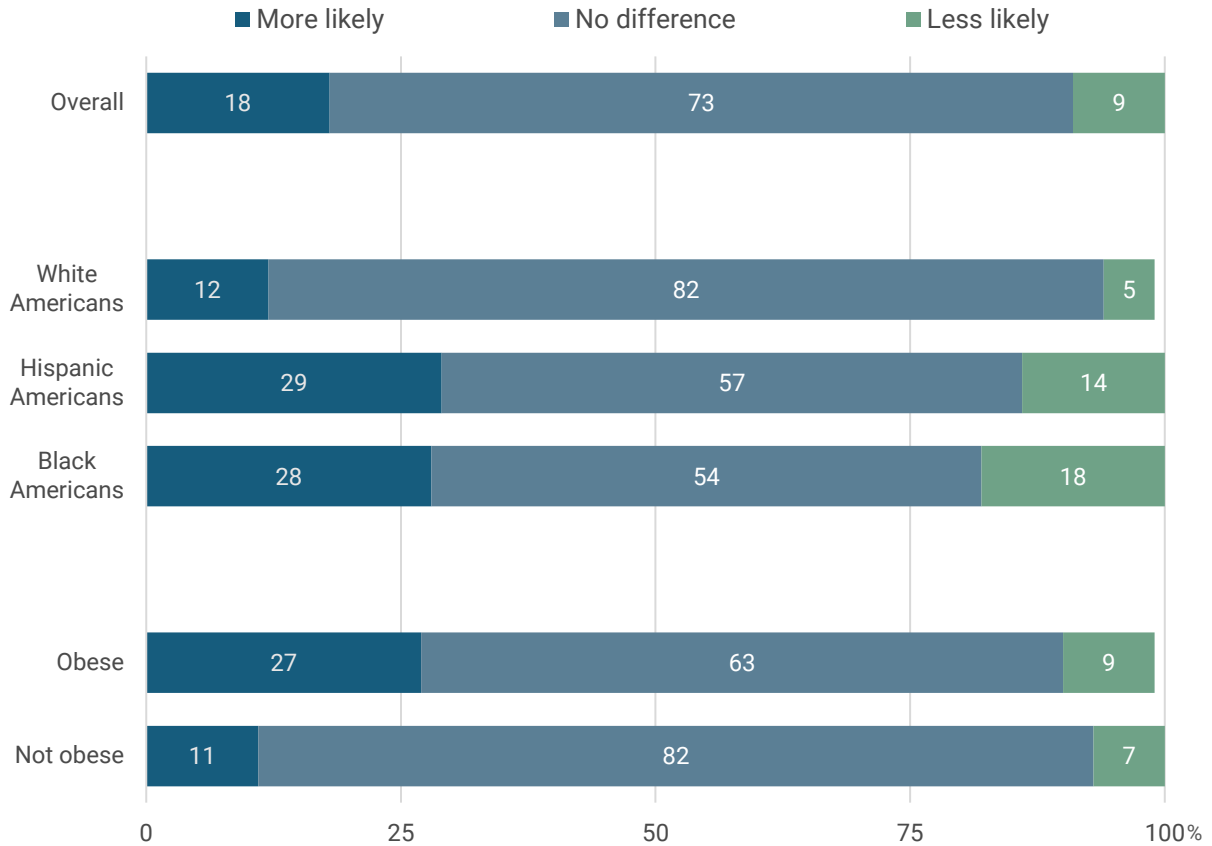


AMERICANS STILL RELUCTANT TO TALK TO THEIR DOCTORS ABOUT OBESITY

Even as concerns about obesity increase during COVID-19, just 18 percent of Americans say COVID-19 made them more likely to bring up the topic of their weight with their doctor compared to before the pandemic. Seventy-three percent of Americans say that COVID-19 made no difference at all, and 9 percent said it made them even less likely to discuss it. Adults with obesity (27 percent) were more likely than those without obesity (11 percent) to cite COVID-19 to bring up the topic. Black (28 percent) and Hispanic Americans (29 percent) were more than twice as likely to bring up the topic of their weight with a health professional due to the pandemic as were white Americans (12 percent).

Because of COVID-19, are you more or less likely to bring up the topic of your weight to your doctor than before the pandemic?

Percent of adults



Question: Because of COVID-19, are you more likely or less likely to bring up the topic of your weight to your doctor or health care professional than you were before the pandemic?

Source: The ASMBS Obesity Study conducted December 10-28, 2021, with 1,714 adults nationwide.

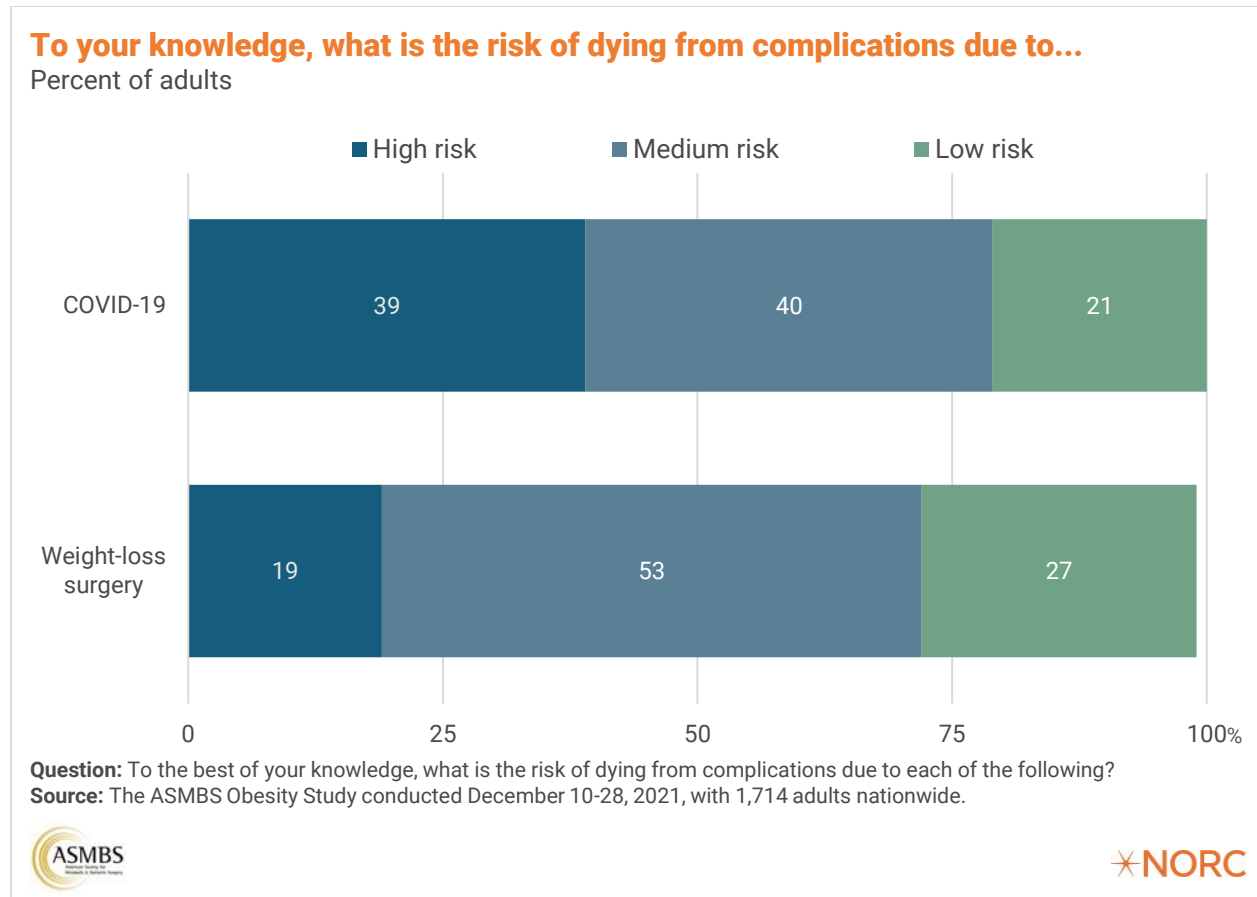


NEW INTEREST IN WEIGHT-LOSS SURGERY AND PRESCRIPTION DRUGS

As noted, 14 percent of those who considered methods of weight loss that they had never considered before the pandemic said they newly considered weight-loss surgery or anti-obesity prescription medications. Meanwhile, 16 percent of adults who have tried to lose weight at some point in their lives and who have not gotten weight-loss surgery have at some point considered the option of weight-loss surgery.

Few Americans consider weight-loss surgery a high-risk procedure, and more consider COVID-19 high-risk. Most Americans consider weight-loss surgery as a medium-risk procedure. Nineteen percent say there is a high risk of dying from complications related to weight-loss surgery, 53 percent say medium risk, and 27 percent say low risk. In comparison, 39 percent of Americans say there is a

high risk of dying from complications related to COVID-19, 40 percent say medium risk, and 21 percent say low risk.



ABOUT THE STUDY

Survey Methodology

The survey was conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago and funded by the ASMBS and the ASMBS Foundation, a nonprofit dedicated to obesity research, education and advocacy. Data were collected using AmeriSpeak®, NORC's probability-based panel designed to be representative of the U.S. household population. 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 and then contacted by U.S. mail, email, telephone, and field interviewers (face to face). The panel provides sample coverage of approximately 97 percent 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. Staff members from NORC at the University of Chicago and the American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery collaborated on all aspects of the study.

Interviews for this survey were conducted between December 10 and December 28, 2021, with adults aged 18 and older representing the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Panel members were randomly drawn from AmeriSpeak, and 1,714 completed the survey—1,644 via the web and 70 via telephone. Panel members were invited by email or by phone from an NORC telephone interviewer. Interviews were conducted in both English and Spanish, depending on respondent preference. Respondents were offered a small monetary incentive (\$2) for completing the survey.

The final stage completion rate is 22.9 percent, the weighted household panel response rate is 17.1 percent, and the weighted household panel retention rate is 75.6 percent, for a cumulative response rate of 3.0 percent. The overall margin of sampling error is +/- 3.3 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level, including the design effect.

In addition, Black and Hispanic respondents were sampled at a higher rate than their proportion of the population for reasons of analysis. The overall margin of sampling error for the 471 completed interviews with Black respondents is +/- 5.8 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level, including the design effect. The overall margin of sampling error for the 438 completed interviews with Hispanic respondents is +/- 6.6 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level, including the design effect.

Sampling error is only one of many potential sources of error, and there may be other unmeasured errors in this or any other survey.

Quality assurance checks were conducted to ensure data quality. In total, 108 interviews were removed for nonresponse to at least 50 percent of the questions asked of them, for completing the survey in less than one-third the median interview time for the full sample, or for straight-lining all grid questions asked of them. These interviews were excluded from the data file prior to weighting.

Once the sample had been selected and fielded, and all the study data had been collected and made final, a poststratification process was 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, housing tenure, and telephone status. Weighting variables were obtained from the 2021 Current Population Survey. The weighted data reflect the U.S. population of adults age 18 and over.

Additional information about the AmeriSpeak Panel methodology is available at:

<https://amerispeak.norc.org/about-amerispeak/Pages/Panel-Design.aspx>

ABOUT THE AMERICAN SOCIETY FOR METABOLIC AND BARIATRIC SURGERY (ASMBS)

The ASMBS is the largest organization for bariatric surgeons in the nation. It is a non-profit organization that works to advance the art and science of bariatric surgery and is committed to educating medical professionals and the lay public about bariatric surgery as an option for the treatment of severe obesity, as well as the associated risks and benefits. It encourages its members to investigate and discover new advances in bariatric surgery, while maintaining a steady exchange of experiences and ideas that may lead to improved surgical outcomes for patients with severe obesity. For more information, visit www.asmb.org.

ABOUT NORC AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

NORC at the University of Chicago conducts research and analysis that decision-makers trust. As a nonpartisan research organization and a pioneer in measuring and understanding the world, we have studied almost every aspect of the human experience and every major news event for more than eight decades. Today, we partner with government, corporate, and nonprofit clients around the world to provide the objectivity and expertise necessary to inform the critical decisions facing society.

www.norc.org.