

Here's What Could Keep You Healthier in 2021

5 trends experts say are here to stay after a year that changed everything



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While 2020 has been an annus horribilis for the well-being of many older Americans, experts say it did usher in at least a few healthy shifts for us all. “The one silver lining of the pandemic is that there were some really positive health trends for older adults that we expect to accelerate and continue into 2021,” says Michael Hochman, M.D., an internal medicine physician at Keck Medicine of USC in Los Angeles and host of the Healthy Skeptic, MD podcast.

Here's what to try to feel healthier in 2021:

A quick hit of mindfulness

Close your eyes and breathe deeply. The number of adults age 50 and older who turned to mindfulness apps and activities in 2020 skyrocketed, at least according to consumer electronics and fitness company Fitbit. It saw a 1,002 percent increase in meditation and a 236 percent increase in yoga in this age group, according to Fitbit's medical director, John Moore, M.D.

If pandemic stress was a major driver of the trend, so was the more Zen-ful way people presumably felt. “People try something like meditation, and they notice that when they do it, they start to feel better — they're calmer, able to think more clearly, and even to use better reasoning when they try to interpret something in the news,” says Bruce Rabin, M.D., a professor of pathology, psychiatry and psychology at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine.

One 2016 UCLA study published in the *Journal of Alzheimer's Disease* found that people age 55 and older who enrolled in a 12-week program consisting of an hour of meditative yoga once a week plus 12 minutes of at-home meditation had significant improvements in both verbal and spatial memory.

Finding a meditative practice may also help you cope with isolation during the pandemic as you wait for your turn to get vaccinated, Rabin adds. A 2012 study published in *Brain, Behavior and Immunity* found that seniors who engaged in a simple eight-week meditation program had significantly decreased rates of self-reported loneliness. One of the easiest ways to incorporate mindfulness into your life is to download one of the popular meditation apps, such as Ten Percent Happier, Aura or Calm, which offer easy exercises you can do several times a day.



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Virtual fitness training

You'll never have to go to the gym again. Online workout classes geared specifically to older adults are booming, with fitness enterprises like Vivo, a strength training company focused on people 55 and over, switching entirely to virtual instruction, and others, such as SilverSneakers and Silver&Fit, launching online offerings. "A lot of these programs are unique because they're specifically tailored to seniors: They're focused not just on helping you gain strength, but also with building balance, mobility and stability," which all become important as we age, says Cedric Bryant, president and chief science officer for the American Council on Exercise.

Many of them also require little or no equipment, having you use your own body weight for strength, "which can often be a safer option," Bryant adds. If possible, look for live virtual classes, where you can interact with the instructor for real-time feedback. This can help reduce

your chances of injury and ensure that you're not working out too hard or not hard enough, but are instead at a “just-right” level. “You want a program that doesn't focus on ‘gentle exercise and stretching’ but instead meets physical activity guidelines for older adults, which include 150 minutes of moderate to vigorous aerobic activity a week and two days of strength training for all the major muscle groups,” says Emily Johnson, founder of StrongerU Senior Fitness.



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Active vacations

Forget cruising. Older travelers want a more socially distanced type of vacation — and in many cases, a little more adventure, too. Steve Silberberg, owner of the adventure travel company Fitpacking, says he's seen a noticeable increase in interest in his company's backpacking trips from boomers and Gen Xers. The coronavirus is a driver, but so are generational preferences, he says. “Our demographic has changed over the years, even before the pandemic, from 40s to 50s to even 60s,” he adds. “These are people who used to take elaborate vacations who now are saying they want an outdoor experience and almost a nostalgic desire to re-create the camping trips of their youth.”

Research has shown that spending time in nature offers health benefits such as lower blood pressure and lower stress hormone levels as well as improved mood. A 2017 study published in *Current Biology* also found that it can improve sleep by resetting your circadian rhythms — your body's internal clock — to a natural sleep cycle. “Trips like cruises are traditionally not the healthiest trips, as people tend to eat and drink a lot and not stay active,” Hochman says. “My hope is that some of my patients will start taking more active hiking and biking trips as we all begin traveling again post-pandemic.”



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Plant-based diets

Eat green and eat clean. The number of Americans following a plant-based diet was already rising (from a mere 290,000 in 2004 to a whopping 9.7 million in 2019) when the pandemic boosted it further. “We saw a surge in people buying plant-based meat products like tempeh or Beyond Meat burgers during the pandemic, when there was a meat shortage,” says David Katz, M.D., founder of the nonprofit True Health Initiative. “But we’re hoping the trend continues beyond that.”

A plant-based diet, Katz says, is particularly beneficial for older adults, as it’s been shown to lower risk and improve symptoms of chronic diseases such as high blood pressure, heart disease, type 2 diabetes, certain types of cancer and even Alzheimer’s. A July 2020 review published in *The BMJ* concluded that the more plant protein people consumed, the lower their risk of death from all causes, and that simply replacing 3 percent of animal protein with plant protein lowered their risk of death by 5 percent. While switching to a plant-based diet may sound daunting, Katz suggests simply limiting your consumption of animal foods like lean meat, eggs and cheese to dinner.



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Checking your vitals — from home

You've heard by now that telehealth took off with the pandemic, enabling you to see anyone from your dermatologist to a psychotherapist from your living room couch. But adding some easy-to-use monitoring equipment to the video chat mix is allowing more older adults in particular to avoid hospital stays, too.

As Hochman of USC explains, medical centers have started programs that guide patients through at-home monitoring of the kind of serious, chronic conditions — including COPD and mild heart failure — that people used to get in a hospital ward. Through such programs, at-risk patients have all their relevant vitals taken at home via a simple wireless bandage device attached to their chest.

"The thought is more patients will actually be likely to seek out care earlier on, because they will know they can be taken care of in the comfort of their own home, rather than have to be in a hospital bed," Hochman says. A 2018 study published in the *Journal of General Internal Medicine* showed even more value: Patients in a hospital-at-home program were more physically active, got more sleep and had lower readmission rates than those who were hospitalized. Medicare has announced that it will begin to allow certain hospitals to bill for this service at home, and private insurers are expected to soon follow.