

## Risk of 'Covid kilos'

# Diets during lockdown

Some people's diets became unhealthier during the spring lockdown. And that included the highly educated. Why was that?

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**P**eople with degrees and those who are overweight were particularly prone to eating unhealthy food during the lockdown, shows a study by Maartje Poelman of the Consumption and Healthy Lifestyles chair group. Poelman and her colleagues base these conclusions on an in-depth analysis of data from the Nutrition Centre, in a study in which 1030 people were asked about their eating and shopping habits during the lockdown in April. The findings have been published in the international scientific journal *Appetite*.

## Routine

The majority of the respondents (83.3 per cent) continued to eat the same things. But Poelman was especially interested in the people whose eating habits did change. 9.6 per cent said they began to eat more healthily, while 7.1 per cent ate less healthy food.

More people with degrees than with lower qualifications reported having adopted less healthy eating habits and buying more sweets and alcohol. 'Remarkable, because in general it is people with lower educational qualifications who have less healthy eating habits,' says Poelman. She does have a possible explanation. 'Before the lockdown, 9 per cent of the respondents occasionally worked at home. During the lockdown, that went up to 14 per cent of those without degrees as opposed to 56 per cent of those with degrees. Home-working changes people's routine, they don't eat at set times and they get up at different times. We didn't ask about that specifically in our study, but people said themselves that they began to eat less healthily because there are more temptations at home, they had more free time and they got more bored.'

Poelman also noticed that people with obesity or overweight found it harder to make healthy choices during the lockdown. Their diets more often became less healthy as they bought more unhealthy products such as crisps, snacks and soft drinks than people with a healthy weight. 'We have seen similar results in other countries. It is possible that stress plays a role in this. It is known that the pandemic leads to stress, and we know that stress affects food consumption and people's weight.'

According to Poelman, the study shows that external factors like a lockdown influence some people more than others. 'It makes vulnerable people even more vulnerable.'

Overweight is a major health problem in the Netherlands, and a risk factor for chronic diseases such as cardiovascular diseases. Poelman: 'This global health



## ‘EVEN IN TIMES OF CRISIS, MOST PEOPLE ARE CREATURES OF HABIT’

problem is not new. It is not as acute as Covid-19, but unhealthy diets and their consequences are the number one cause of death worldwide.’

But some of the respondents said they had gone over to a healthier diet during the lockdown. One third of them did this to give their immune systems a boost. And people also said there were fewer temptations such as parties, birthday

cakes or vending machines. And being at home more meant more time to cook healthy meals.

### **Creatures of habit**

According to Poelman, it is hard to predict what the long-term effects of the lockdown will be on lifestyles and public health, but it is important that the government keeps the subject high on the agenda, for example through the existing

Prevention Agreement, with its ‘joined-up approach’. ‘That is essential,’ says Poelman. ‘You can’t leave the responsibility for a healthy lifestyle with the individual. We know that that doesn’t work, however much we’d like to believe that we are in control of our lives. Don’t forget that the majority of the respondents said their diet didn’t change. That shows how hard it is to change eating habits: even in times of crisis, most people remain creatures of habit, whether their diets are healthy or unhealthy.’ ■

### **Urgency**

‘The urgency of a healthy lifestyle is greater than ever because of the coronavirus pandemic,’ says Emely de Vet, Professor of Consumption and Healthy Lifestyles. ‘There is more to it than keeping the healthcare system running and developing vaccines.’ According to the professor, the pressure on healthcare is set to increase further in future because of lifestyle-related diseases. ‘Lifestyles are influenced by a complex set of factors, with a big role for the social background. We are afraid that the coronavirus will further widen the gap between rich and poor. At the start of the lockdown, a lot of people started hoarding and the food banks had much less to offer, which made access to healthy food harder for vulnerable people. And people on low incomes are more likely to do jobs they can’t do at home, which makes physical distancing rules harder to stick to. That might put them at greater risk of infection. They also do the jobs that are more likely to be affected by loss of income, and a lower income often goes hand in hand with worse health.’

It is not easy to change behaviour, says De Vet. ‘Information campaigns don’t necessarily help. People with less healthy lifestyles caused by stress and debt benefit more from debt counselling than from information campaigns about a healthier diet and lifestyle. We need to think hard about how to bring lifestyle interventions to the people who need them the most.’