Canadian Perspectives Survey Series 2: Monitoring the effects of COVID-19, May 2020

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The COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact Canadians in a number of ways, including affecting their behaviour and attitudes. Despite the reopening of some sectors of the economy, Canadians are still expected to follow physical distancing rules, work from home if possible and limit their social interactions.

Many Canadians have lost their jobs or their primary source of income because of the pandemic, and this is creating anxiety and worry among Canadians and their families.

In the first web panel survey—conducted from March 29 to April 3, soon after COVID-19 restrictions were implemented—Canadians reported high levels of concern about the health, social and economic consequences of the pandemic. Survey results also showed that the majority of Canadians were following recommendations, such as physical distancing measures, to limit the spread of the virus, and that a notable proportion of Canadians modified their weekly activities because of the pandemic.

In the second web panel survey, conducted from May 4 to May 10, respondents answered a number of additional questions about their mental health, behaviour, labour market activities and food insecurity. Over the coming weeks, Statistics Canada will release several products that will examine these topics.

This release looks at whether Canadians continue to adhere to the recommended health and safety practices and includes new information on their social interactions. It also provides new information on various mental health indicators and examines whether weekly habits have changed over the course of the pandemic.

The findings show that, while Canadians continue to adhere to health and safety practices and limit their social interactions, the pandemic is taking a toll on the mental health of many groups, especially women and younger Canadians.

Most Canadians continue to follow physical distancing guidelines

In the first survey, respondents were asked about the types of precautions they were taking as a result of the pandemic. The same question was asked again in the second survey.

Results show that the majority of Canadians (approximately 9 in 10) continue to follow physical distancing guidelines, such as staying home, using physical distancing while out in public, and avoiding crowds or large gatherings. Similar results were found for both men and women, and across age groups.

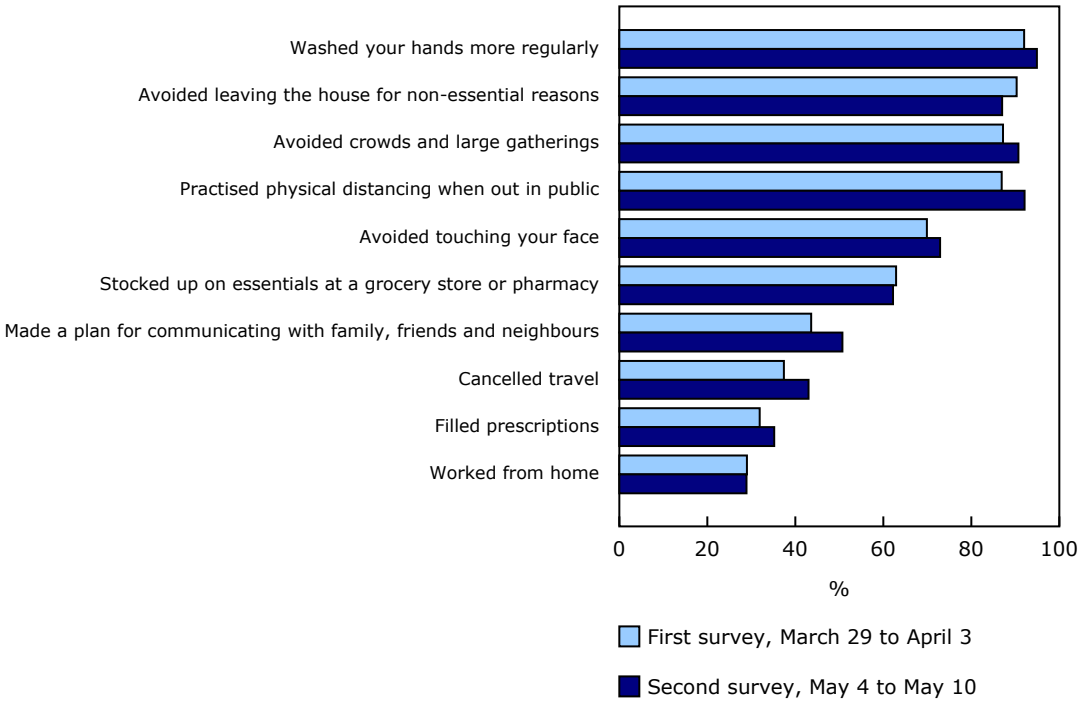
Canadians became even more likely to report practising physical distancing while out in public. During the first survey, 87% of respondents said that they were practising physical distancing; one month later, that proportion was 92% (Chart 1). Increases were also seen in the proportion of Canadians who reported washing their hands more regularly (from 92% to 95%) and the proportion of those who avoided crowds and large gatherings (from 87% to 91%).

Canadians were also more likely to report that they had made a plan to communicate with family, friends and neighbours. In the second survey, 51% said that they had made such plans, up from 44% a month earlier. Canadians were also more likely to report that they had to cancel travel.

Conversely, Canadians became slightly less likely to avoid leaving the house for non-essential reasons (from 90% to 87%). This could be related to the introduction of lockdown-lifting measures.

Other precautions—such as stocking up on essentials, filling prescriptions, avoiding face touching and working from home—were as likely to be followed as they were a month earlier (no significant differences).

Chart 1
Main precautions taken by Canadians because of COVID-19, by period of web panel survey



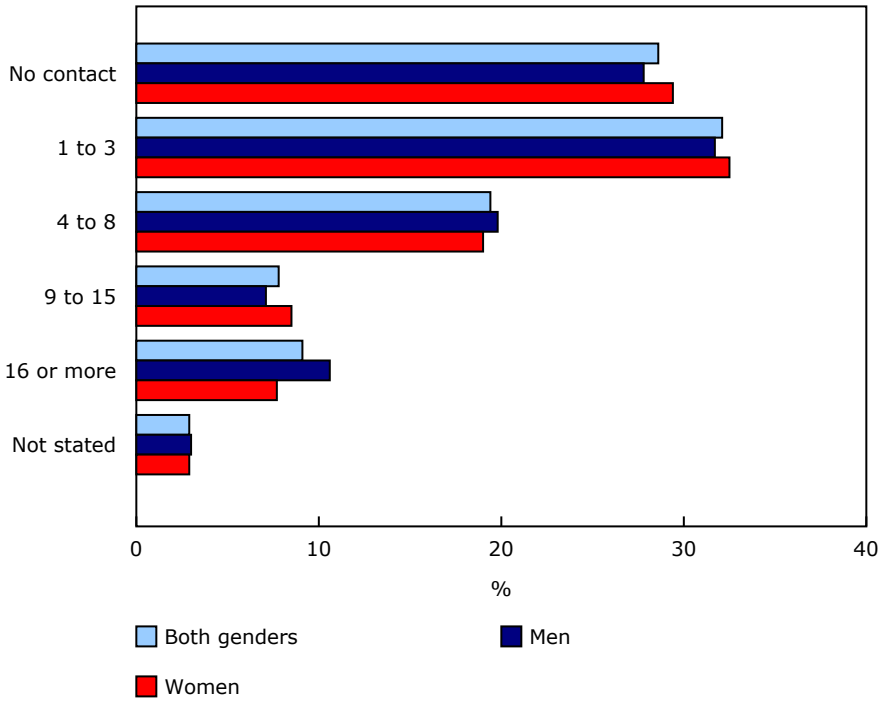
Note(s): All differences between the first web panel survey and the second were statistically significant, with the following exceptions: "avoided touching your face," "stocked up on essentials at a grocery store or pharmacy," "filled prescriptions" and "worked from home."
Source(s): Canadian Perspectives Survey Series 1 (March and April 2020) and Canadian Perspectives Survey Series 2 (May 2020).

The majority of Canadians have few social interactions with non-household members

In an attempt to slow the spread of COVID-19, Canadians were asked to stay home and limit their social interactions. In the most recent survey, conducted from May 4 to May 10, Canadians were asked about the number of people that they had come in close contact with during the previous day and previous week. Close contact was defined as the respondent having been within 2 metres of a person who does not live in the same household.

The majority of Canadians reported having limited interactions with other individuals in the past week. About 3 in 10 Canadians (29%) said that they had not been in contact with anybody outside their household during the past seven days, and 32% said that they had been in close contact with three people or fewer. Similar results were found for men and women (Chart 2).

Chart 2
Number of people in close contact over the past seven days (except members of own household), by gender, second web panel survey



Note(s): No statistically significant differences were found between men and women for any of the categories.
Source(s): Canadian Perspectives Survey Series 2 (May 2020).

However, at the other end of the spectrum, 9% of Canadians reported that they had been in contact with at least 16 people over the past seven days.

One explanation for these results is that a significant number of Canadian workers, including front-line workers, cannot work from home. Among those who mainly worked at a location outside the home, 30% came in contact with at least 16 non-household members over the past week. This compared with 4% among those who mostly worked from home, 3% among those who were not working and 2% among those who were absent from work.

Almost one in five Canadians reports feelings of moderate or severe anxiety

The COVID-19 situation is having a significant impact on the daily lives of Canadians. Some Canadians have contracted the virus or have been indirectly affected by it. A number of Canadians are stricken by grief, financial hardship and labour market difficulties. Canadians are also spending extended periods at home, which can be stressful for individuals of all ages.

Feelings of depression, grief, fear, panic and anxiety can be normal responses to situations where day-to-day routines are disrupted and circumstances are uncertain. The survey asked respondents about feelings related to anxiety, one of the most common reactions to such situations.

Almost one in five Canadians reported symptoms consistent with moderate or severe anxiety. This percentage was higher for women (21%) than for men (15%). Youth aged 15 to 24 were more affected (27%) than middle-aged adults (19%) and seniors (10%).

These results are consistent with previous population health surveys (conducted prior to COVID-19) that indicated that youth typically report higher levels of anxiety than older adults, and that women report higher levels of anxiety than men. In addition, these results are consistent with recent results that indicated that, since the pandemic began, youth were most likely to report a negative impact on their mental health, compared with older adults.

Anxiety was measured using the GAD-7 scale, which is used in population health surveys to identify probable cases of generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) and to measure the severity of anxiety symptoms. A person is considered to have symptoms consistent with "moderate" to "severe" anxiety if they have a pattern of frequent, persistent worry and excessive anxiety about several events or activities.

Readers who want to know more about mental health trends in the context of the pandemic are invited to consult the infographic Mental health of Canadians during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Canadians have increased their consumption of alcohol and junk food

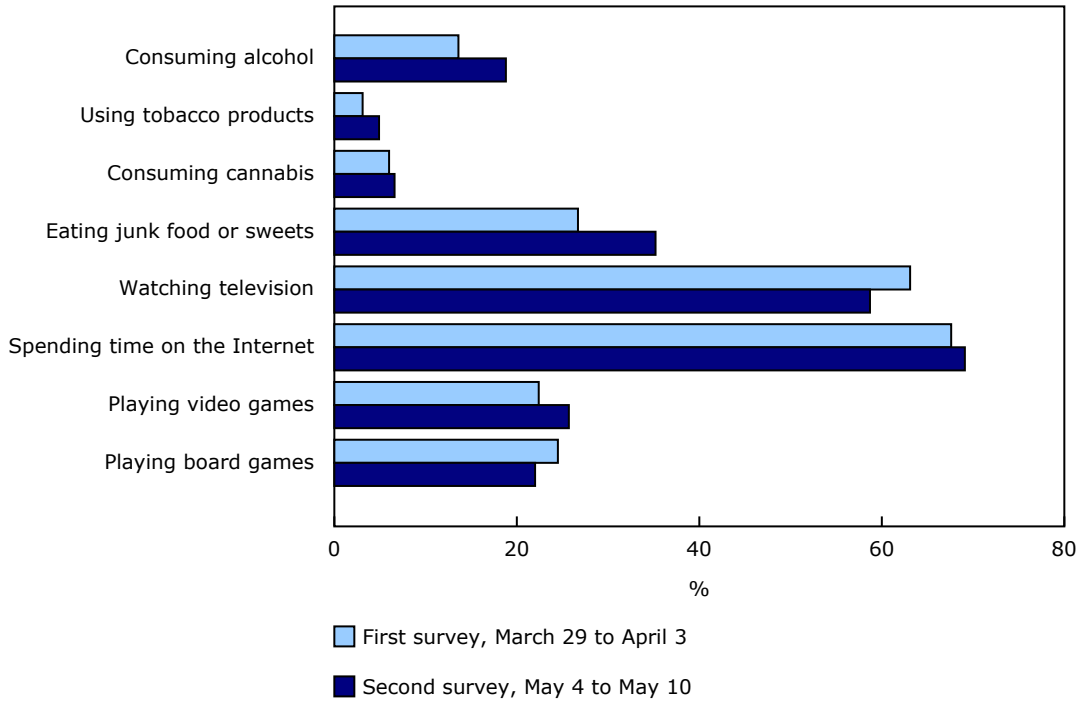
Previous research shows that some Canadians have increased their consumption of substances, such as alcohol, since the beginning of the pandemic.

Compared with the first survey, conducted between March 29 and April 3, respondents to the second survey were even more likely to report that their consumption of alcohol had increased during the pandemic. Close to one in five Canadians (19%) said that their consumption of alcohol had increased, compared with about 14% a month earlier (Chart 3).

Canadians were also more likely to have increased their consumption of junk food. A month ago, 27% of respondents said that they were eating more junk food or sweets. That proportion increased to 35% a month later.

These trends were true for both men and women, and for younger and older Canadians.

Chart 3
Proportion of Canadians who increased certain weekly habits because of the COVID-19 pandemic, by period of web panel survey



Note(s): Statistically significant differences were found between the first web panel survey and the second only for "consuming alcohol" and "eating junk food or sweets." For other categories, the differences were not statistically significant.
Source(s): Canadian Perspectives Survey Series 1 (March and April 2020) and Canadian Perspectives Survey Series 2 (May 2020).

The pandemic continues to have a significant impact on the health, finances and social activities of many Canadians. The pandemic will likely generate enduring social and economic changes, and the impacts will be different for various groups of Canadians. Statistics Canada will continue to monitor the impacts of COVID-19 on Canadians.

Note to readers

Data in this release are from Statistics Canada's new Canadian Perspectives Survey Series (CPSS), which represents a panel of Canadians who have agreed to complete a number of short online surveys. The CPSS is a probabilistic panel based on the Labour Force Survey and is therefore representative of the general population. The CPSS enables Statistics Canada to collect important information from Canadians more efficiently, more rapidly and at a lower cost, compared with traditional survey methods. The first iteration of the CPSS was conducted from March 29 to April 3 and collected information from 4,600 respondents. The second iteration of the CPSS was conducted from May 4 to May 10, with mostly the same respondents. Statistics Canada would like to thank the Canadians who took the time to answer these questions at this time of crisis.

Definitions, data sources and methods: survey number 5311.

The infographic "Mental health of Canadians during the COVID-19 pandemic" is now available as part of the series *Statistics Canada – Infographics* (**11-627-M**).

For more information, or to enquire about the concepts, methods or data quality of this release, contact us (toll-free 1-800-263-1136; 514-283-8300; **STATCAN.infostats-infostats.STATCAN@canada.ca**) or Media Relations (613-951-4636; **STATCAN.mediahotline-ligneinfomedias.STATCAN@canada.ca**).