

COVID-19 reshaped the way we buy, prepare and consume food

November 1 2022, by Katherine Labonté and Daiva Nielsen



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

In early 2020, as [province after province in Canada declared public health emergencies](#), and pandemic restrictions came into force, routine grocery runs changed dramatically.

Faced with the uncertainty caused by COVID-19, many people [across](#)

[Canada](#) and [around the world](#) began to stockpile [food](#) and other products.

This was the beginning of a series of impacts that the pandemic had on our experiences with food.

To better understand food-related decisions during the pandemic, our research team conducted an [online survey](#) among a sample of adults from the province of Québec. This survey spanned three different time points between the initial lockdown in the spring of 2020 and the [curfew period in Québec](#) in the winter of 2021.

Food purchases: How and why?

Our study showed that [people reduced their frequency of shopping for food in store](#) at the beginning of the pandemic. This reduction occurred in tandem with [a rise in curbside pick-up and delivery](#). The general rise in popularity of no-contact grocery methods [was not unique to Canada](#), and was likely due to people seeking to limit their exposure to the virus.

Our survey suggests that in-store shopping frequency had returned to its pre-pandemic level by mid-2020. However, the use of no-contact grocery methods is [expected to persist among a considerable portion of the population](#).

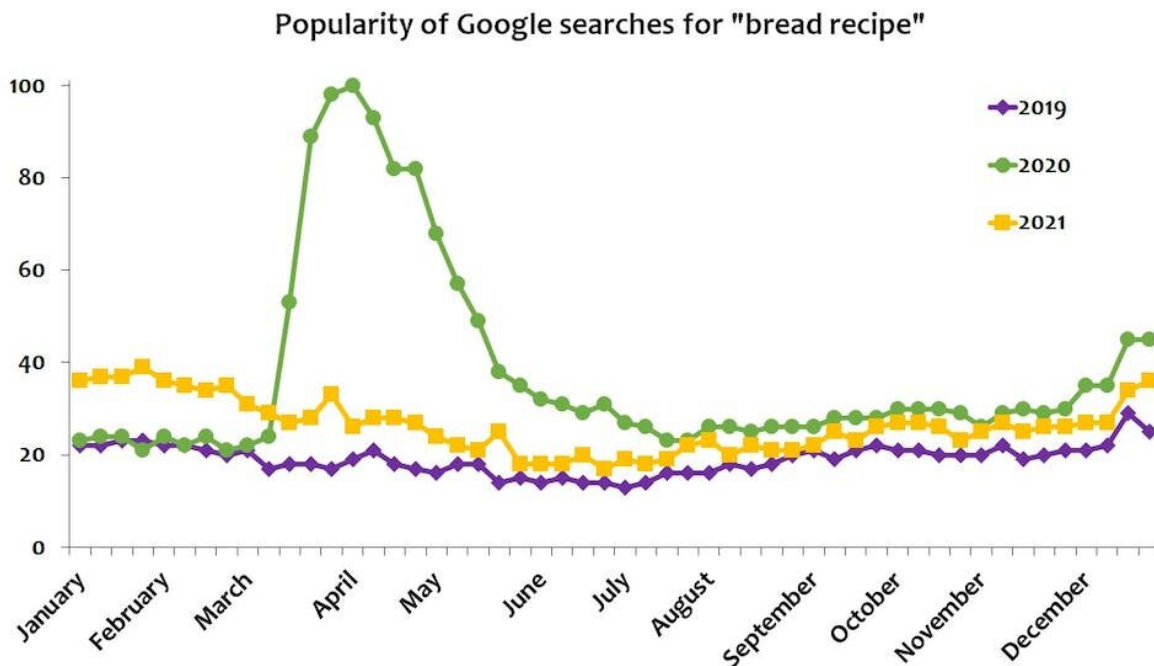
The pandemic not only changed the way we purchased food, but also the motivations behind those purchases. [As shown in our upcoming research](#), more than three-quarters of our survey respondents expressed an increased desire to support local food retailers compared to 2019. Furthermore, 68 percent of them placed increased importance on the country of origin of food products.

Respondents also stated that their purchasing decisions were motivated

by the [safety and price](#) of food products as well as the [environmental](#) and ethical impact.

More home-cooked meals

Major societal changes like restaurant closures, home schooling and teleworking came with an [increase in frequency of cooking at home and improved food-related skills like cooking and meal planning](#). Many Canadians [have learned new recipes](#), and the [much-reported rise in the popularity of baking](#) is corroborated by a [drastic increase in online searches for bread recipes](#) in the first weeks of the pandemic (which remained higher than pre-pandemic until well into 2021).



Popularity of Google searches for the term ‘bread recipe’ (or its French equivalent ‘recette de pain’) over 2019, 2020 and 2021 in Canada. Searches peaked in April 2020, during the initial pandemic lockdown. Credit: Google

Trends

Improved food-related skills were [most pronounced among families](#), which is likely due to an [increase in children's participation in cooking activities during lockdowns](#). In addition, more than one-third of survey respondents in our upcoming study identified increased time and motivation to cook, comfort and enjoyment derived from food, and interest in food as reasons for enhanced skills in their household.

While better cooking skills and more frequent home cooking may be considered beneficial, they came with a downside. Some people seemed to become fatigued of preparing meals over the course of the pandemic, which was reflected in an increase in take-out or delivery orders for prepared foods in early 2021 compared with 2020.

Temptation and health

The effect of the pandemic on eating behaviors varied across individuals. On the one hand, food appears to have been used as a source of comfort and a way to avoid boredom during the pandemic lockdowns. More than one-quarter of our respondents reported an [increased desire to eat during the pandemic](#) compared to before, as (in their own words) they were at home and around food all the time.

On the other hand, a small proportion of respondents reported that their desire to eat had decreased. The main reasons for this change were feelings of stress and anxiety as well as decreased motivation to cook.

Lockdowns also had mixed effects on the healthiness of food choices. [A study summarizing data collected worldwide](#) found that, overall, people reported consuming more [unhealthy foods](#) like snacks and sweets during

pandemic lockdowns.

However, some individuals also seem to have taken advantage of the pandemic lockdowns to make [healthier food choices](#). Unhealthy changes might have been offset by increased consumption of healthier foods such as fruits and vegetables, legumes, and cereals.

The wide variability in diet-related changes may in part be explained by the varied impacts of the pandemic on individuals' personal circumstances. [More changes in eating behaviors were likely observed in those whose regular work conditions were disrupted](#) by the pandemic, such as losing a job or transitioning to teleworking.

Moreover, given the unexpected occurrence of COVID-19, most studies had to compare participants' food habits during lockdowns with their memories of their pre-pandemic habits. However, [these recollections may not always correspond perfectly to reality](#).

More research needed

Vulnerable groups were likely underrepresented in most studies on the food-related impacts of the pandemic. Future research is needed to understand how pandemic-induced changes in eating habits will evolve over time across age groups, socioeconomic statuses, and household structures.

Time will tell whether the changes in our food-related values and skills will be permanent or will dissipate as we return to our pre-pandemic lives. The [pandemic](#) might have brought some positive changes to our relationships and skills with food. Continued support for local food products could help promote healthy eating and the sustainability of our food system.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: COVID-19 reshaped the way we buy, prepare and consume food (2022, November 1) retrieved 14 August 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-11-covid-reshaped-consume-food.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.