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SIGHTLINES

# Americans Are Becoming Both Healthier and Unhealthier

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September 2, 2026

# Americans Are Becoming Both Healthier and Unhealthier

New findings from the Sightlines Project reveal a growing divide in how Americans live, age, and experience health.

## Executive Summary

The biggest change in American health over the past 15 years is not improvement or decline—it is divergence.

Between 2007 and 2022, Americans reported increases in both healthy and unhealthy behaviors. Physical activity increased. So did sedentary behavior. More adults reported healthy habits, but excessive alcohol use and other health risks also rose. The result is not a simple divide between healthy and unhealthy Americans. Instead, Americans are increasingly diverging—both across groups and within individuals, many of whom are simultaneously accumulating health-promoting and health-damaging behaviors.

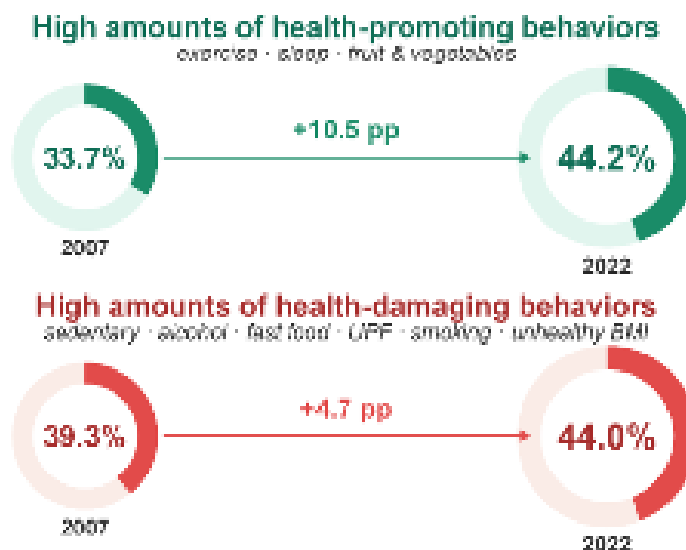
These trends are especially pronounced among older adults and across income groups, suggesting that the benefits of longer lives are not being experienced equally. Understanding these emerging patterns is essential if society is to ensure that longer lives are also healthier, more secure, and more fulfilling lives.

The data used in this analysis is drawn from seven waves of the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES), spanning 2007-2022.

## A New Pattern in American Health

### More Americans report doing high amounts of both healthy and unhealthy behaviors.

Share of U.S. adults doing two or more of three healthy behaviors and three or more of six adverse behaviors, 2007 vs. 2022



The conventional story about American health assumes that people are becoming either healthier or less healthy over time. The latest Sightlines findings suggest something more complicated is happening. In 2007, 33.7% of Americans engaged in high amounts of healthy behaviors—defined as doing two or more of three behaviors like exercising regularly, sleeping well, and eating fruits and vegetables. By 2022, this percentage had increased to 44.2%. At the same time, the share of Americans engaged in high amounts of unhealthy behaviors, such as sitting too long, drinking heavily, or eating fast food—rose from 39.3% in 2007 to 44% in 2022.

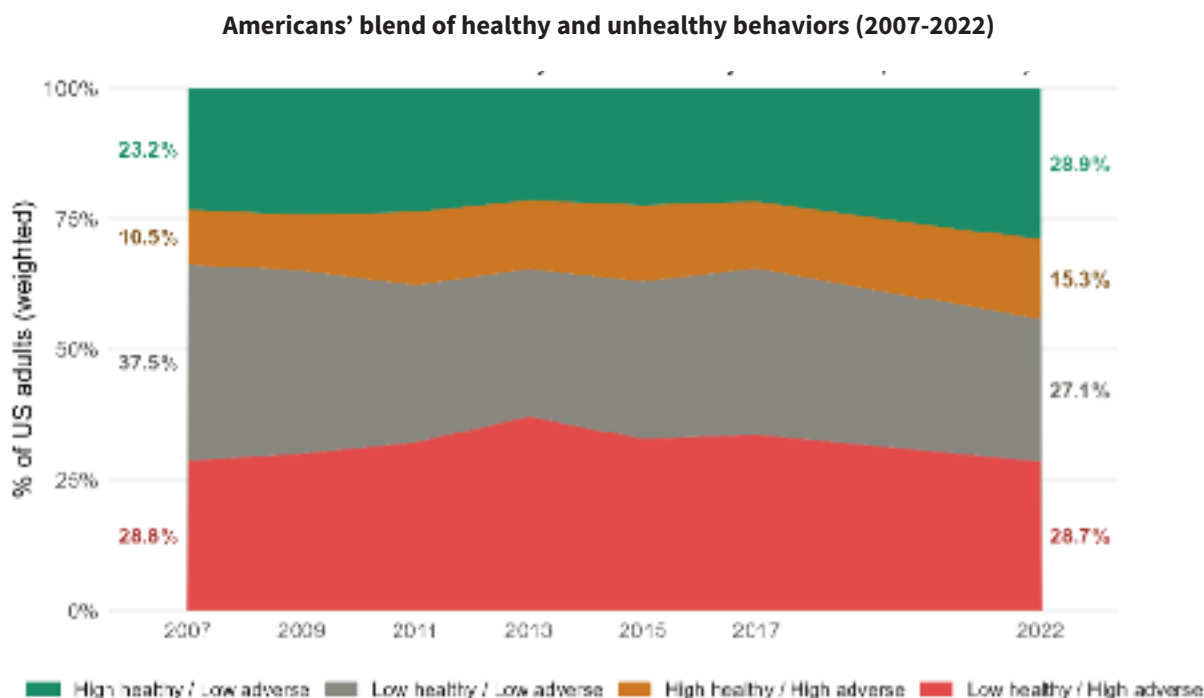
Americans are increasingly doing more things that promote health while simultaneously engaging in more behaviors that undermine it. The result is a population that is becoming harder to describe using simple averages and increasingly defined by divergence.

This matters because Americans are living longer than ever before. The question has long been not simply how long people live, but how well they live those additional years. It now seems that the answer lies not just in broad health promotion throughout long lives, but in promoting healthy behaviors and minimizing unhealthy behaviors as two separate issues.

## Key Finding #1: The Great Health Paradox

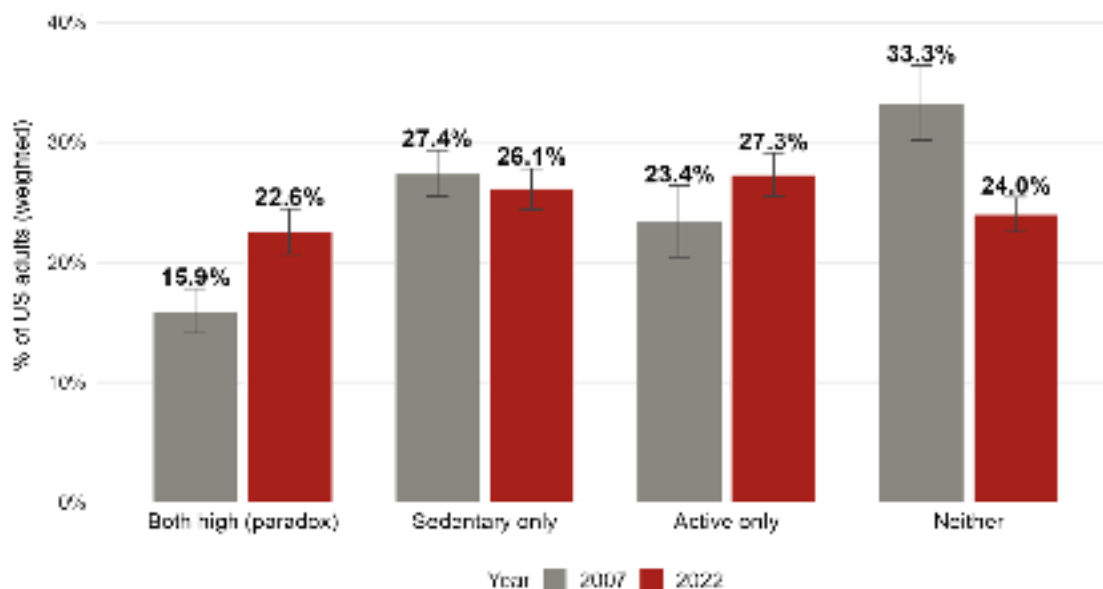
Between 2007 and 2022, both healthy and unhealthy behaviors increased.

Fruit and vegetable consumption improved. Physical activity increased. More adults reported getting adequate sleep. Yet sedentary behavior also rose, excessive alcohol consumption increased, and illicit drug use became more common.



One of the most surprising findings is that physical activity and sedentary behavior increased at the same time. The share of Americans who were simultaneously highly active and highly sedentary grew by almost 50%.

**Sedentary time and physical activity crossover - 2007 vs 2022**



The modern American lifestyle increasingly combines behaviors that promote health with behaviors that undermine it.

### Why It Matters

Public conversations about health often assume a single direction of change. The data suggest otherwise. Future interventions may need to address increasingly complex lifestyles rather than simple healthy-versus-unhealthy categories.

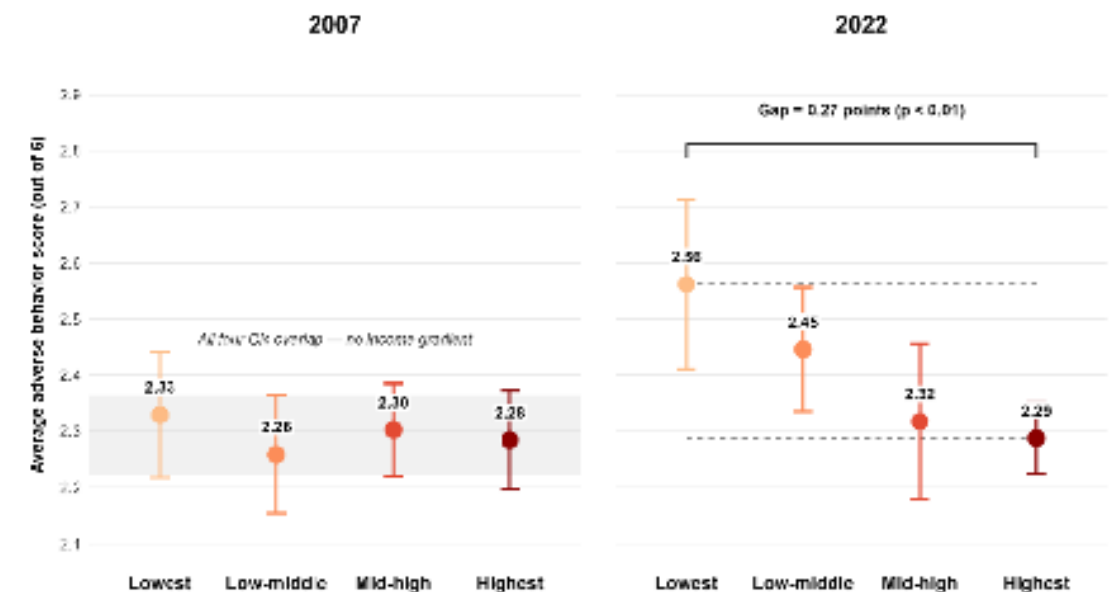
## Key Finding #2: Americans Are Becoming More Behaviorally Polarized

The most important trend may be growing polarization. In terms of health behaviors, any two Americans today are less likely to be similar to one another than in 2007.

The average number of healthy behaviors increased modestly. However, variation increased significantly. Americans are spreading out across a wider range of behavioral profiles. In 2007, most Americans were neither participating in health-promoting behaviors nor engaged with unhealthy behaviors. This was no longer the case in 2022, with a rapidly growing segment reporting both high levels of healthy behaviors and high levels of adverse behaviors. The middle is shrinking. In this 15-year span, some Americans have adopted healthier lifestyles. Others accumulated additional risks.

The polarization in Americans' health behaviors is most notable across income levels. While cigarette smoking rates have plummeted among the wealthiest Americans, especially younger ones, improvements among less wealthy Americans have been much more modest, and among some age groups, cigarette smoking rates have actually increased between 2007 and 2022.

A similar picture emerges in unhealthy weight. For the lowest income quartile, the rate of unhealthy BMI crossed 50% in 2022, while it remained below 40% for the wealthiest quartile. These gaps in specific behaviors are telling, but the true scale of the problem emerges when we consider all behavioral benchmarks together. Taken together, in 2007 all four income groups carried indistinguishable average adverse behavior scores. Over the following 15 years, that near-equality disappeared. By 2022, the gap had grown to 0.27 points, now statistically significant. The lowest income quartile now carries significantly more adverse behaviors than the highest income quartile.



### Why It Matters

The most important changes in health may be hidden beneath population averages. While overall measures can suggest modest improvement, they can also conceal growing differences in how people live and age, with income playing an increasing role in shaping health behaviors. As Americans increasingly sort into distinct behavioral profiles, understanding who is thriving, who is struggling, and why becomes essential for designing effective health policies and interventions that make healthy long lives attainable for everyone, regardless of income.

## Key Finding #3: Older Adults Are Driving the Divergence

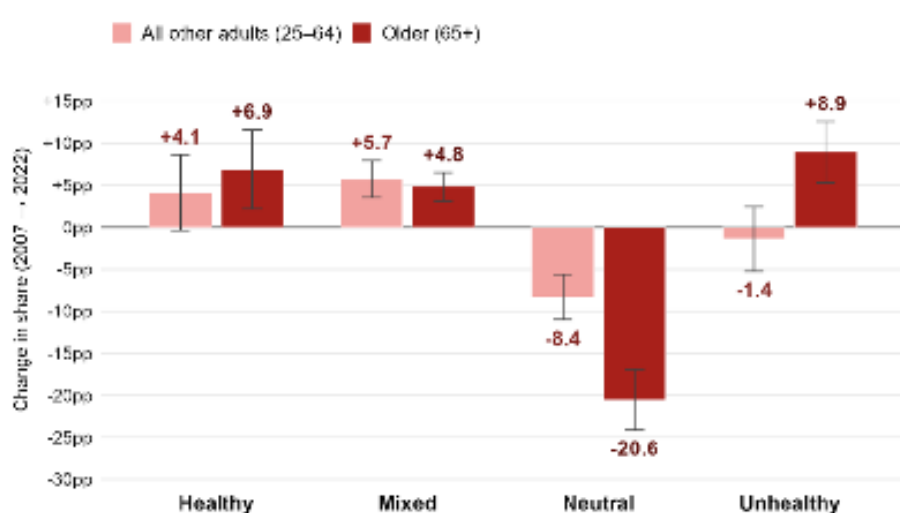
Behavioral polarization is most visible among adults ages 65 and older.

Older Americans recorded some of the largest gains in physical activity of any age group. At the same time, they experienced some of the largest increases in excessive alcohol consumption. The broad pattern is that the share of adults ages 65 and older in the healthiest quadrant (high healthy behaviors and low adverse behaviors) rose from 29.7% to 36.6%, while the share in the high-risk quadrant also grew from 15.9% to 24.8%. These shifts were significantly larger than the changes observed in adults under 65, where the healthy quadrants rose only 4.1 points and the high-risk quadrant actually fell slightly. The one area where younger adults kept pace is the mixed quadrant (high healthy and high adverse behaviors together), which grew at a similar rate across age groups.



## Older adults polarized more than the rest of the population

Percentage point change in each behavior quadrant between 2007 and 2022, older adults vs. rest



As a result, more older adults are appearing in both the healthiest and highest-risk behavioral profiles. Later life may be becoming a critical behavioral turning point shaped by retirement, caregiving, widowhood, changing routines, and social transitions.

### Why It Matters

As life expectancy increases, the behaviors people adopt later in life play a growing role in determining whether additional years are lived in good health. The findings suggest that retirement, caregiving responsibilities, changes in social networks, and other life transitions may increasingly shape health trajectories. Supporting healthy aging may depend as much on navigating these transitions as on traditional health interventions.

## Questions for Further Investigation

1. Why are older adults experiencing greater behavioral divergence than any other age group?
2. What structural conditions are driving widening income-based differences in healthy living?
3. Why are healthy and unhealthy behaviors increasingly appearing together within the same individuals?
4. What interventions can prevent longer lives from becoming increasingly unequal lives?

## Conclusion

The central finding of this report is not that Americans are becoming healthier or unhealthy. It is that Americans are increasingly diverging—experiencing longer lives through dramatically different health trajectories.

Healthy and unhealthy behaviors are rising simultaneously. Older adults are increasingly concentrated at both ends of the behavioral spectrum. Income-based disparities are widening. And the fastest-growing behavioral profile combines both healthy and unhealthy habits in the same individuals.

The Sightlines Project helps make these patterns visible. By tracking healthy living, financial security, and social engagement over time, it reveals where progress is occurring, where disparities are widening, and where action may be most urgently needed.

*These findings represent just one view of a rapidly changing landscape. Explore the full range of Sightlines indicators and interactive data at [sightlinesproject.stanford.edu](https://sightlinesproject.stanford.edu).*

## Methods

Health behaviors were classified using literature-based thresholds for each behavior, which were then combined into composite Health-Promoting and Health-Impairing scores. The analyses were conducted in R using the survey package to apply sampling weights and preserve the representativeness of estimates for the U.S. population. Data collection spans seven NHANES waves from 2007 to 2022, and the analysis was compiled and conducted over the course of 2025 and 2026 by the Research team at the Stanford Center on Longevity.