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How Healthy Are Orthodox Jews?

By Mark Trencher

I was a lean 170 pounds when I got married ... 28 years later I was a bloated 223. As we say in my old Flatbush neighborhood, “*Oy Gevalt!*” My lifelong seesawing weight (I’ve been on pretty much every diet) was, fortunately, not accompanied by any other health issues, but it did make me think of health a lot. So much so that I have a spreadsheet with my daily weight going back 30 years. (No, OCD is not one of my issues.)

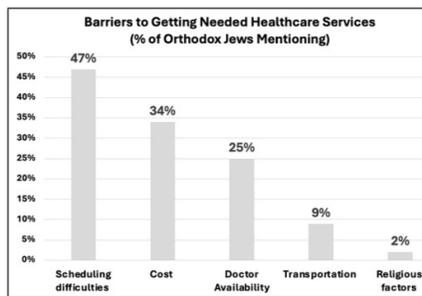
In doing Orthodox community research, it kind of surprised me that while people were very interested in issues relating to finances, married life, *davening*, learning, off the *derech*, *baalei teshuvah*, Israel, antisemitism, politics, and much more, I got at best a half-hearted response any time I tried to do a survey on health. “Why bother? What’s going to change? ... Shabbos is Shabbos ... I love the shmorg ... What? I should skip the *kiddush*? ... Who has time for the gym? ... etc.”

Still, people talk about it so there must at least be an awareness of its importance, right? And we need to go much deeper than just nutrition, which is the first thing most people mention.

When Dr. Miriam Knoll, the founder and CEO of JOWMA (The Jewish Orthodox Women’s Medical Association) reached out to me with an interest in collaborating on a community survey, I was delighted. The end result is that we have heard back from over 1,100 members of the *frum* community (*yeshivish*, *chassidish*, and Modern Orthodox) on their health knowledge, access to care, personal and family health concerns, and much more, making this the largest broad study of health in the community. The results have been very interesting, and here is just a taste (pun intended) of what we discovered.

For starters, nearly everyone in

the community has health insurance. But even with the insurance, people have problems in finding a doctor (25%), with many reporting that there are shortages of competent providers; and even more so in scheduling an appointment (47%), as many report long wait times. Cost can also be a notable concern (34%).



How do people view their own health? While 69% say they are in better health than others in the community, only 3% say their health is worse than average. Clearly, we see here an example of “grade inflation.”

We also find variations in preventive care. Almost all (88%) have a wellness checkup at least every two years, and that’s good. The vast majority of women get mammograms and people also get colonoscopies (based on age). Readers may not be surprised that there are large drop-offs among the *chassidish* and *yeshivish* communities in receiving flu shots (just under half) and even more so in getting COVID vaccines (10%).

But the good news (and I say this is good news with the hope that it creates awareness and action) is that when we asked people about specific health conditions – and whether *they themselves* were concerned – people became self-aware and forthcoming with their concerns.

Es is Shver tzu Zein a Yid

We are all familiar with this Yiddish statement. It is hard to be a Jew. Sad but true. Did you know that *shver* also means heavy? According to ChatGPT, “For literal weight (e.g., a heavy object), *shver* is translated as heavy, and burdensome.” Like my 223-pound self, it was pretty burdensome.

And in fact, nutrition, diet and weight rank as the #1 personal health concern out of a list of 20 areas, with 37% of all survey respondents (and 43% of *yeshivish* and *chassidish*) saying it was a top personal concern for themselves. And 58% of all Orthodox Jews say they are overweight.

The top dozen personal health concerns, mentioned by 10% or more of Orthodox Jews, are as follows:

Orthodox Jews’ Top Health Concerns	%
1. Nutrition, diet, weight	37%
2. Heart, cardiovascular	31%
3. Mental health	27%
4. Physical activity	21%
5. Arthritis, chronic pain	20%
6. Diabetes	17%
7. Women’s Health (among women)	17%
8. Gastro-Intestinal	14%
9. Dental Health	14%
10. Men’s Health (among men)	14%
11. Vision	11%
12. Hearing	10%

Asked to elaborate on the issue of nutrition, diet and weight, people often mention excessive junk food, sweets, and snacks, with many admitting to frequent treats, cookies, cake, chips, processed snacks, or “nosh” throughout the day instead of balanced meals. For example:

- “I eat more cake, cookies and chips than healthy food.”
- “I eat snacks all day until supper... it’s all junk

food mostly.”

Additionally, also cited quite often is the food culture and overeating on Shabbos and *Yom Tov*, as well as *simchas*. Many see this as a huge health obstacle:

- “No one needs 47 side dishes. No one is starving. Please calm down with the extra dips.”
- “Eating on Shabbos and holidays is excessive, far beyond what is needed for a *seudah*.”
- “We need to change the culture in our community surrounding Shabbos eating. Get rid of the *shul kid-dush*, lower expectations on what a Shabbos meal looks like.”
- “Frum culture makes being healthy hard by normalizing eating a ton and eating unhealthy.”
- “Stop eating sugar and cut down on meat... read ingredients... protect your body – love yourself.”

The #2 ranked health concern relates to heart health. People mention aging, genetics, persistent and growing problems, high blood pressure, cholesterol, and the impact of diet and weight ... the latter also contributing to concerns about diabetes (#6 on the list).

I will admit that I have in the past doubted the extent of mental health problems. But our recent survey on the causes of divorce found a huge percentage of divorcees (47%) saying that “untreated or undisclosed mental health challenges or personality disorders” were a “major reason” for their divorce. And now, in this health survey, mental health ranks as the #3 health concern, with more than one in four Orthodox Jews expressing concern about their own mental health, often citing depression, psychological stress, or burnout as affecting their overall health:

- “There is still a stigma in the community, but more people are becoming aware of the need to treat mental health issues.”
- “Mostly mental health, struggling with the overwhelm of day-to-day life juggling full-time work, a family and household. Also, financial stress plays a role.”
- “Access to high-quality mental healthcare for children and adults is a major challenge.”

Beyond the personal concerns, we asked about families, and many mentioned having aging parents and elderly relatives, with mobility decline, dementia, heart issues, and worries about caregiving, independence, and decline:

- “My parents are in their 70s with all the stuff that comes with that.”
- “Parents aging and constant Dr. appointments... I am the individual everyone turns to with medical questions.”

You Want Advice?

This article is intended to summarize just a few of the many highlights. A question I am sometimes asked is: What is done with research findings? Are they helping anyone?

To add real value to this study, I am delighted that Dr. Jennie Berkovich, JOWMA's Director of Education, authored 12 pages in the report of extremely helpful "Medical Observations & Recommendations" for the most-cited concerns. This is really great advice and direction, and we would love it if people read the report and started to think about their health and how to improve it. (Dr. Berkovich and I will discuss the findings on the next episode of "The Orthonomics Podcast.")

The entire report is available and downloadable for free at <http://nishmaresearch.com/social-research.html> (the report is at the top of the list of available reports and articles.)

In conclusion, as stated in *Devarim*: "*Sh'marnam m'od l'naphshotaychem*"— and Rambam elaborates on this in his *Mishneh Torah (Hilchot De'ot 4:1)*, stressing the importance of maintaining physical health in order to have a stronger connection to Hashem. Great advice for all of us!

Mark Trencher is the founder and director of Nishma Research, the most prominent independent non-profit market research and polling practice in the Orthodox Jewish world, and host of the Orthonomics podcast. He can be reached at mark@nishmaresearch.com.