

The Covid 15: Lockdowns Are Lifting, and Our Clothes Don't Fit

By Suzanne Kapner

"Body-measuring app Perfitly LLC noticed a 20% increase in users redoing their profiles in April and May compared with a year ago, said CEO Dave Sharma. It normally sees that kind of a jump in January after holiday weight gains. While Perfitly doesn't track whether profiles are getting larger or smaller, Mr. Sharma suspects people are sizing up."

Amanda Ponzar knew she had gained weight from all her baking while sheltering at home in Alexandria, Va., but she hadn't realized how much until she ordered shorts online from Walmart Inc.

They had an elastic waist but were still too tight. "You need smaller thighs to wear those," her 12-year-old son told her.

She is now buying bigger sizes as a stopgap until her old clothes fit.

"I will have to buy more clothes," said Ms. Ponzar, 43, who works for a health-care nonprofit, "but I'm determined to lose weight before I go back to the office this fall."

People spent the spring sheltering at home in sweatpants, perfecting banana bread recipes and indulging in pandemic-induced stress-eating. Most of them escaped Covid-19, but not the "Covid 15"—what people are calling the quarantine weight gain pushing Americans into roomier wardrobes just as lockdowns lift.

Google searches for "elastic waist" spiked in recent weeks, according to Google Trends data. Body-measuring apps are reporting a jump in people redoing their profiles and choosing looser fits. Some retailers say they are increasing orders of bigger sizes.

Rudy Glocker, founder of Burgeon Outdoor, which sells apparel and other outdoor gear online and from a store in Lincoln, N.H., said more women are ordering men's sizes, which tend to be less fitted, while men are going up a size.

"It looks like the gym is going to be closed for a while," Mr. Glocker says one customer told him, "so I better order the larger size." Mr. Glocker is adding XXL sizes in items such as T-shirts, fleece pullovers and fleece jackets for fall.

"People are realizing they still need to look good from the waist up on their Zoom calls," said Tanya Zhang, co-founder of dress-shirt seller Nimble-Made.com, "but if they've gained a few pounds their shirts are too tight." Roughly 10% of the company's customers have gone up a size in recent weeks, she said.

Before the pandemic, Mary Ann Lowry of Frisco, Texas, was dieting for her son's June 28 wedding. Sheltering at home, she started bingeing on nutrition bars and peanut butter, she said. Now, with lockup lifting, the 65-year-old educational diagnostician faced the prospect of shopping for a wedding dress.

Unable to zip up her pants, she got on the scale. "Holy moly," she said, "I gained 11 pounds in three weeks."

Unsure of her new size, she ordered two pairs of jeans from Talbots in different sizes and returned the larger pair. For the wedding, she bought a dress from a local boutique one size larger than she wore pre-pandemic.

It was still too tight and had to be let out around the waist, she said: "You could see my stomach rolls and my belly fat."

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"We think this is driven by folks gaining weight," he said, "given they are less active and more confined versus before the stay-at-home orders, or eating more, either out of stress or boredom."

Amanda Dexter of St. Joseph, Mo., had to change her profile, which includes height, weight and other measurements, with Stitch Fix Inc., an online personal-shopping service and clothing retailer, after ordering her normal size jeans only to find they didn't fit.

"It got to the point," she said, "where I didn't want to leave the house, because I didn't have any clothes that fit."

She went up three sizes on Stitch Fix before finding the right pair. For tops, the 34-year-old teacher-turned-freelance writer changed her preference to "loose" from "fitted," she said, adding: "I'm not wearing anything form fitting these days."

For retailers, gains from additional sales can be offset by a jump in returns, said Ray Li, CEO of online bespoke-clothing company Sene. A group of industry executives on a recent Zoom call discussed their concerns about rising returns from size changes during the pandemic, said Mr. Li, who was on the call.

Burgeon Outdoors's Mr. Glocker, also on the call, said a customer recently ordered a \$100 fleece but had to exchange it for a larger size, costing the retailer an extra \$14 in shipping. "We offer free shipping and free returns," he said, "but all the extra returns are eating into profits."

Industry return volumes have doubled over the past three months, estimates Narvar Inc., a software company that processes returns for more than 200 brands, as more shopping has shifted online. Narvar CEO Amit Sharma estimates retailers in aggregate are facing upward of \$800 million in expenses from the additional returns in the second quarter.

Some shoppers are getting a rude surprise, finding that larger sizes sometimes cost more than smaller ones. Clothing companies have justified the practice by saying the additional fabric adds costs, according to industry executives. Many consumers see it as bodyshaming.

"I was annoyed that I had to pay extra for the larger size," said Brett Downes, who recently ordered extra-large Puma shorts from a third-party seller on Amazon.com Inc. They cost about 12 British pounds, he said (about \$15), while the medium—his size before he gained 30 pounds during lockdown—cost about eight British pounds. An Amazon spokeswoman said the retailer doesn't price its own listings based on size but that third-party sellers set their own prices.

Mr. Downes, the 38-year-old founder of a search-optimization company, said he gorged on potato chips, chocolate and pizza, while sheltering at home in South Wales, U.K.

"I can't fit into any of my clothes," he said, "but I'm hoping the weight will come off before I have to buy a new wardrobe."