

BIKE SALES HAVE RISEN BY MORE THAN 40% DURING PANDEMIC

The bicycling boom

Health experts hope this trend, which brings fitness benefits to riders, will persist

Michael Precker

American Heart Association News

It doesn't seem right to put "silver lining" and "pandemic" in the same sentence. But the past year of COVID-19 has been a boon for bicycling, an indisputably healthy activity.

"Bikes have been one of those bright spots, as we've been getting through this last year," Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg told the National Bike Summit in early March. "People have been rediscovering how we get around, to the extent we still can."

The numbers bear that out.

Bike sales rose by more than 40%, according to the National Bike Dealers Association, and stores around the country still report shortages. Two surveys during the year by the advocacy group PeopleForBikes indicated that 10% of adults in the U.S. hopped on a bike for the first time in at least a year because of the pandemic.

"Everyone was genuinely shocked," said Jenn Dice, president and CEO of PeopleForBikes, based in Boulder, Colorado. "Bike counter numbers, both in urban and rural recreation areas, were off the charts. It was, 'Holy smokes. People are riding bikes like crazy.'"

Experts cite several factors for the surge. With gyms closed, people wanting to exercise went outside. People hesitant to ride buses or subways used bikes instead. Many cities took steps to make streets more bike-friendly.

"One of the positive outcomes of this unfortunate situation is this return to the outdoors," said Bill Strick-



Brad Horrigan/Tribune News Service

A bicyclist makes use of a bike lane.

land, whose official title at the helm of Bicycling magazine is rider-in-chief. "With so many people at home with their kids, they said, 'Let's go ride our bikes.'"

Whatever the reason, it's a healthy choice.

"We know physical activity is good for us," said Bethany Barone Gibbs, associate professor of health and physical activity at the University of Pittsburgh. "It's very clear that regular physical activity enhances cardiovascular health and overall physical and mental health. We call it the magic pill. Literally, there is almost no health condition that physical activity doesn't improve."

To cite just two examples, a 2017 BMJ study in England encompassing more than 263,000 people showed those who biked to work had less cardiovascular disease and cancer. A 2016 Danish study published in the American Heart Association's journal *Circulation* tracked nearly

54,000 people over 20 years and found that regular cyclists had an 11% to 18% lower risk of cardiovascular disease than noncyclists.

"We don't need a bunch more research about whether physical activity improves health," Gibbs said. "We just have to figure out how to get more people to do it."

So, as the pandemic subsides and life returns to normal, health experts and bike advocates alike ask the same question: Will the trend roll on?

"We're cautiously optimistic that Americans will keep riding," Dice said. "They're telling us they're having fun, they've been forming good habits, for recreation and for health, and they want to stick with it."

Strickland said the country has seen bike booms before, "going back all the way to the (1973) gas crisis, when Greg LeMond won the Tour de France (in the 1980s) and the Lance Armstrong years."

"We see a spike and then

there is a drop, but it rarely returns to the level it was before," he said.

One cloud hanging over the optimism is the ongoing shortage of new bikes amid soaring demand. Heather Mason, president of the National Bike Dealers Association, said manufacturers are stepping up production, but are being hampered by lack of parts.

"Overall demand is not going to keep up with supply this year," she said. "We think we're going to be in a shortage at least until 2023."

The lesson for consumers, she said, is threefold: get to a store quickly, be patient, and consider buying a used bike.

"There will be bikes," Mason said. "But it's a little different buying experience these days."

In the long term, Strickland and Dice agreed better infrastructure will help keep the bike boom going. Dice said the pandemic has accelerated the trend toward creating more protected bike lanes in cities and rural bike paths that could eventually grow into a national network.

"I really believe we're just transforming as a country," Strickland said. "Cycling is going to be a bigger and bigger part of how we get around."

At the bike summit, Buttigieg — who was recently spotted biking home from work in Washington, D.C. — promised to help.

"We can definitely be more of a bicycling country," he said. "Whether it's hard resources or whether it's moral support, you're going to see a lot of energy coming from my office and my team to help move things along."

Oregon balks at cellphone app to track virus spread

By Andrew Theen

The Oregonian/OregonLive

Oregon said Tuesday, April 6 that it won't approve widely adopted technology that would allow smartphone users to be notified if they are potentially exposed to COVID-19, saying the health authority has "all available resources" assigned to vaccine management.

The announcement ended suspense over a project first announced six months ago but repeatedly delayed, with limited explanation. Oregon is one of just four states along or west of the Continental Divide that hasn't adopted the technology.

The state for months had said it was studying the program's efficacy after a pilot project at Oregon State University, but officials were initially unable to produce documentation of their analysis.

In a news release Tuesday, April 6, the health authority said it "decided to pause the ongoing planning" for the application to "focus on vaccinations and other priority efforts to end the COVID-19 pandemic."

Officials wrote that discussions with public health departments and other community groups highlighted the benefits and costs of the notification app.

But they opted not to move forward, citing "the intensive efforts state and local health officials would need to undertake to promote the app and address likely gaps in its adoption across Oregon's diverse communities, as well as the added contact tracing demands full adoption would place on county public health staff."

After announcing it would "pause" its plans Tuesday, the state did provide a two-page document to The Oregonian/OregonLive in response to a public records request.

"The OSU pilot was not able to collect data to either prove or disprove its effectiveness for Oregon citizens," the undated document reads, adding, "Given current resource constraints and the focus on the vaccination effort, the recommendation is to discontinue the effort at this time."

Nearly 12,500 students and staff at Oregon State downloaded or activated the exposure notification system, which the state said was a 20% adoption rate out of 40,000 people.

But it's unclear if that rate is reflective of the situation, as the university reported enrollment of only 23,000 at its Corvallis campus this fall — and some portion of those students were learning remotely.

In fact, there were no instances where a student or staff member received a notification for potential COVID-19 exposure because there were a "relatively small number of people on campus," and "relatively few cases detected on campus" during the pilot because "most students were taking classes online," according to the two-page report.

More than half a million people enroll under special health insurance offer

By Ricardo Alonso-Zaldivar

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — More than a half million Americans have taken advantage of the Biden administration's special health insurance sign-up window keyed to the COVID-19 pandemic, the government announced Wednesday, April 7 in anticipation that even more consumers will gain coverage in the coming months.

The reason officials expect sign-ups to keep growing is that millions of people became eligible effective Apr. 1 for pumped-up subsidies toward their premiums under President Joe Biden's coronavirus relief legislation. The special sign-up opportunity for Affordable Care Act plans will be available until Aug. 15.

Biden campaigned on a strategy of building on the Obama-era health law to push the United States toward coverage for all. As president, he's wasted no time.

With the number of uninsured Americans rising during the pandemic, Biden reopened the law's health insurance markets as a backstop. Then, the virus aid package essentially delivered a health insurance price cut by making taxpayer subsidies more generous, while also allowing more people to qualify

for financial assistance.

Those sweeteners are available the rest of this year and through the end of 2022. Consumers who were already covered by the health law at the beginning of this year are also entitled to the increased financial aid, but will have to go online or call to update their plan. People on average could save \$50 a month, the government says.

The numbers released Wednesday by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services show that 528,005 people newly signed up for government-sponsored private plans from Feb. 15 to Mar. 31.

But those figures are incomplete because they cover only the 36 states served by the federal HealthCare.gov insurance market. National enrollment will be higher when totals are factored in later on from states such as California and New York that run their own insurance websites.

The new report also showed that more than 870,000 people who went to the HealthCare.gov website or reached out to the call center were found to be eligible for Medicaid, the federal-state health program for low-income people.

Although President Donald Trump spared no effort to overturn the Obama-era law,

more than 20 million people remained covered under it at the end of Trump's term. That number combines those with HealthCare.gov plans as well as low-income adults covered through expanded Medicaid. But with the economy shedding jobs because of coronavirus shutdowns, the number of uninsured Americans has been on the rise. Biden sought to stop the erosion, and hopes to ultimately reverse it.

Among the states showing strong gains in enrollment are several big ones that went for Trump in last November's election, including Florida, Texas, and North Carolina. Florida recorded the biggest gain, with more than 146,000 sign-ups.

The nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office estimates that about 33 million Americans are uninsured. That's still less than when President Barack Obama's health care law was passed, but it is a reversal from prior years in which the uninsured rate steadily declined.

The CBO estimates about 3 million people lost coverage as a result of the pandemic. Some private experts estimate higher numbers, in the range of 5 million to 10 million.

Republicans say expanding the health law is the wrong way to go, but they

have been unable to coalesce around a health care vision of their own. That's left the political field to Biden, who is maneuvering with narrow Democratic margins in Congress to try to execute an ambitious health agenda, including a new "public option" plan as an alternative to private insurance, and granting Medicare the power to directly negotiate prescription drug prices.

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