

Consequences of covid-19 on the childhood obesity epidemic

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Reply to: Covid-19 has made the obesity epidemic worse, but failed to ignite enough action.

Senthilingam describes the growing obesity epidemic and rightly identifies that the COVID19 pandemic presents opportunities for change.[1] However, there was little exploration of the pandemic's impact on the longstanding childhood obesity epidemic.[1] The consequences of childhood obesity on physical and mental health, self-esteem and social wellbeing are endangering the health of children and will increase future demand on NHS resources.[2]

The most recent UK National Child Measurement Programme (data collected pre-pandemic) demonstrates that 21% of children aged 10-11 are already obese, increasing to 27.5% in more deprived areas.[3] This is likely only to worsen following COVID19 lockdowns (which have affected 75% of school children globally): weight gain is correlated with time spent out of school during holiday closures and is greater amongst those of lower socioeconomic status.[4 5] Combined with food insecurity (over 20% of UK households worse off financially now than before the pandemic), families are more likely to buy cheaper and more calorie-dense foods.[6]

Physical activity has also decreased further. Prior to the pandemic over 50% of children were already not achieving physical activity guidelines.[7] Despite restrictions allowing 60 minutes of exercise in a local area, nearly 30% of children report not leaving the house during a typical lockdown day.[8] With parks, recreational areas and sports clubs closed and increased screen time, there has been further reduction in physical activity in young people; this is more pronounced among ethnic minority communities.[8 9]

Like previous policy documents, the July 2020 UK Obesity Strategy does not go far enough to address underlying health inequalities linked with childhood obesity[10]. It contains many previously proposed (but never implemented) strategies, and these measures are weak in comparison with other countries.[10-12] With the convergence of the childhood obesity epidemic and the COVID19 pandemic, now is the time for urgent and decisive action by government to protect the wellbeing of children and future health of the UK population. Furthermore, supporting children of lower socio-economic status and those from ethnic minority communities must be a priority.

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