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COVID-19 AND OBESITY EPIDEMIC

Consequences of covid-19 on the childhood obesity epidemic

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Senthilingam describes the growing obesity epidemic and rightly identifies that the covid-19 pandemic presents opportunities for change.¹ But she does little to explore the pandemic's effect 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) shows that 21% of children aged 10-11 are already obese, increasing to 27.5% in more deprived areas.³ This is likely to worsen after covid-19 lockdowns, which have affected 75% of schoolchildren globally—weight gain is correlated with time spent out of school during holiday closures and is greater among those of lower socioeconomic status.^{4 5} Combined with food insecurity (over 20% of UK households are 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. Before the pandemic, over 50% of children were 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 on a typical lockdown day.⁸ With parks, recreational areas, and sports clubs closed and screen time increased, 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 tackle 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 Convergence of the childhood obesity epidemic and the covid-19 pandemic means that now is the time for urgent and decisive action by government to protect the wellbeing of children and future health of the UK population. Supporting children of lower socioeconomic status and those from ethnic minority communities must be a priority.

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Full response at: <https://www.bmj.com/content/372/bmj.n411/rr-7>.

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