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Research and analysis

Wider impacts of COVID-19 on health: summary

Updated 24 September 2020

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Wider Impacts of COVID-19 on Health (WICH) summary, 24 September 2020.

This Public Health England (PHE) monitoring tool looks at the wider impacts of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on population health. This report briefly highlights the main findings.

This resource will be updated weekly with new time point data for existing metrics and new metrics covering relevant themes where data become available. In some cases, a metric is from a single time point data collection and therefore figures will remain unchanged week on week. This will be continually reviewed and the resource will be updated as appropriate for relevance and timeliness.

Overview

Areas of daily life in England have all seen some noticeable changes since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The beginning of 'lockdown' in England was 23 March. Easing of lockdown began on 10 May. At this time, people who could not work from home were encouraged to return, avoiding public transport where possible, and were allowed to take unlimited outdoor exercise.

Further easing took place in the first half of June, allowing up to 6 people to meet outdoors, and outdoor sports amenities and outdoor non-food markets to open. More significant lifting of restrictions took place on 15 June. This permitted reopening of retail shops and some other public-facing businesses. On 4 July, pubs, restaurants, hotels and hairdressers were permitted to open with the implementation of social distancing measures.

Mental health

Adults experienced high anxiety levels in the week immediately preceding lockdown and the 2 following weeks. The prevalence was around double the average for 2019. It has since declined, but is still above 2019 levels.

Community support

In general, data up to 2 August show that people have felt supported during the pandemic. Similarly, the majority of people felt that people were helping others more than before. These patterns were seen across income, age, sex and ethnic groups.

Homeschooling

From 23 March 2020 until the start of the 2020 autumn term, most schools in England were closed to children other than those with parents who were keyworkers or who are classed as vulnerable. In the 4-week period up to 7 June, around 70% of parents reported homeschooling their children.

Travel, access to outdoor space and time spent on activities

Mobility patterns changed visibly during the pandemic. The initial message to 'stay at home' during lockdown showed high levels of compliance and all transport use saw a steep decline in the 2 weeks post lockdown.

Since then, public transport use has remained below pre-lockdown levels, but trips in cars and light and heavy goods vehicles are now back to normal levels. Visits to parks, while down at first, are now above pre-lockdown levels. Trips in residential areas have been consistently above pre-lockdown levels. Trips to retail and recreation areas have been gradually increasing since mid-June when the general reopening of English retail shops and public-facing businesses was announced.

Access to green space and outdoor space is important for health and wellbeing. Those living in the London region have the lowest level of access to private outdoor space, but also the shortest distance to travel to access public green spaces. Those in higher-income groups have greater access to private garden space, as do those from a White ethnic background and those in age bands 45 years and over.

Restrictions in place during lockdown and subsequently have had an impact on how people were able to use their time. Comparisons with data from 2014 to 2015 show that during lockdown people were spending less time travelling, studying, doing housework and on personal care, and more time sleeping and resting, entertaining and socialising, gardening and DIY, and working from home.

Air quality

Air quality data is available for London, Manchester and Birmingham. Improvements in air quality since the introduction of lockdown are mainly due to reductions in the concentration of the nitrogen oxide (NO₂) in the environment. Data for NO₂ up to the beginning of August show that these values are generally lower than the same period in 2019.

Grocery purchasing and food usage

The volume of grocery purchases rose sharply just before lockdown on 23 March and volume sales are still higher than at the same point in 2019. Since lockdown began, shoppers have made fewer trips than in the same period last year but have been buying more per trip.

Changes in food use behaviours are most visible among the younger age groups, households with children and those who were self-isolating. About half of the 16- to 34-year-olds changed their food use patterns between April and June, while the habits of most of the older age groups remain consistent. There has been a shift towards cooking more from scratch, eating together with the family and eating healthy meals, but also a marked increase in snacking, especially in April and May.

Alcohol, smoking, gambling and physical activity

Alcohol intake across the population as a whole remained about the same during lockdown, with almost half reporting that they had neither increased nor decreased their drinking. Those aged 18 to 34 were more likely to report consuming less alcohol each week than before and those aged 35 to 54 were more likely to report an increase. There was an increase in the proportion of 'high risk' drinkers between February and June 2020.

Compared with the 2018 average, smoking prevalence declined in the 4-week period ending 5 July. Smoking prevalence for people aged 16 to 24 more than halved over the same time period. There has been an increase in the number of people attempting to quit smoking during the pandemic with 38% of smokers attempting to quit in the 3 months up to June 2020. Over the counter nicotine replacement therapy (NRT) and e-cigarettes remain the most commonly used aids to quitting; however, during the pandemic there has been a reduction in their use and a corresponding increase in people attempting to quit unaided.

The proportion of adults spending money on all types of gambling, including betting and the lottery has decreased during the pandemic compared with before. This was seen across all age groups and both sexes.

In April and May, about a third of adults reported doing at least 30 minutes of physical activity on 5 or more days in the previous week. Since then and up to the 3 August, there has been a decrease to slightly over a quarter reporting this level of physical activity.

Around a third of adults reported doing more physical activity than usual during the lockdown period from 3 to 6 April to 8 to 11 May 2020, but over a third said they were doing less. Similarly, just under a third of parents reported that their children were doing more physical activity compared with before lockdown although just over a third said they were doing less.

Access to care

Of those reporting that they had a worsening health condition during the week leading up to 10 August, around 50% reported that they have not sought advice for their condition. The most common reason for not doing so was to avoid putting pressure on the NHS.

Impact on employment and businesses

The number of people who had been made redundant or took voluntary redundancy increased from the quarter February to April 2020 to May to July 2020. The rate for May to July 2020 is also higher than for the same quarter in 2019. From March 2020 to August 2020, there was a small decrease in the proportion who were in paid work or those who had a job that they were expecting to return to after lockdown. The proportion of those claiming unemployment benefits more than doubled between March and May and has remained at a similar level during June and July. These figures may not yet reflect the true impact of the pandemic.

Lockdown meant significant impacts on businesses in terms of turnover and impact on the workforce. In the 2-week period ending 12 July, nearly a fifth of the UK workforce was on furlough and over a fifth of all enterprises across all industries in the UK had a turnover that had decreased by between 20% and 50%. Since then and up to the 2-week period ending 23 August, the proportion of the UK workforce on furlough leave has decreased to 1 in 10, as lockdown restrictions have been gradually relaxed and more businesses have been able to reopen. The proportion of industries that had a decreased turnover of more than 50% has reduced by two-thirds in the same time period.

Maternal outcomes

Data show that compared with a monthly average baseline of combined data from 2016 to 2020, there was a decrease in the percentage of premature birth deliveries in England in April and May 2020. There was no change in other outcomes, such as the percentage of deliveries with low or very low birthweight in England or the percentage of deliveries which included one or more stillbirths.