

POSITION STATEMENT: HEALTHY WEIGHT AND COVID-19

KEY MESSAGES

- Covid-19 “lockdown” has had both positive and negative impacts on food consumption, but these impacts have been felt differently across the social gradient
- Obesity is a significant risk factor for severe complications from Covid-19, including greater risk of hospitalisation, ICU and death
- The Government should urgently address the drivers of obesity in relation to Covid-19, and ensure adequate support is available and accessible for the most vulnerable

Healthy Weight and Covid-19

The coronavirus pandemic is the defining global health crisis of our time and has had far-reaching health, social and economic implications [1]. Covid-19, a new strain of coronavirus, can cause pneumonia-like symptoms with those who have fallen ill having reported to suffer coughs, fever and breathing difficulties and in severe cases organ failure [2].

Evidence has identified that people living with obesity are at a greater risk of developing severe Covid-19 complications compared to those with a normal weight [3,4]. Obesity is associated with a number of underlying health conditions including diabetes, heart and respiratory disease, a weakened immune system and reduced lung function, all of which increase the risk of developing severe Covid-19 complications [4]. However, there is no data reporting that people with obesity have a higher risk of contracting the virus [2].

Currently, 62.3% of adults are experiencing overweight or obesity in the UK and 1 in 3 children by the time they reach Year 6 [5,6]. It is unclear how ‘lockdown life’ may have further impacted these figures, but we know that it has led to changes in people’s eating and exercising habits, with evidence of increased snacking and online takeaway orders and a decrease in physical activity, particularly among children and adolescents [7].

However, the slower pace of life has also had a positive impact on some individuals, including a surge in home cooking, baking and gardening. It is worth remembering that these changes have been felt differently across the social gradient, with lower socioeconomic families hit hardest by the social and economic implications of the pandemic [8].

What does the evidence say?

Challenges

- Research suggests patients with overweight and obesity who have COVID-19 are at increased risk for mortality and intubation compared to those with normal BMI. [3].
- One study suggested 38% of UK adults were snacking more during lockdown [9].
- 50% of 16-24 year olds used overeating to cope with depression and anxiety during lockdown according to one study [10].
- Massive decrease in fruit and vegetable intake among children on free school meals [11]
- A number of studies have reported a decrease in physical activity among children during lockdown [12,13].
- During early lockdown, panic buying in supermarkets resulted in less fresh and staple foods on the shelves and an increased reliance on long-life, processed foods, with sales of snack items increasing by 18% [14].
- Just Eat saw a 33% increase in online takeaway orders, with deliveries for breakfast and desserts increasing by 50% and 80% [7].

Opportunities for recovery

- Lockdown led to a 38% increase in home meals eaten per week, with more than a fifth of Brits cooking every meal from scratch, compared to just one in eight before the lockdown [15].
- A Europe-wide survey suggests that more people were choosing healthier meals, taking note of the nutritional value of foods and seeking out foods with added benefits [16].

Policy context

In July, the Prime Minister announced a new obesity strategy to “get the nation fit and healthy, protect themselves against Covid-19 and protect the NHS” [16]. Measures include a ban on TV and online adverts for foods high in fat, sugar and salt before 9pm, end of ‘buy one get one free’ deals on less healthy foods and calories to be displayed on menus to help people make healthier choices when eating out. Whilst the new measures address some aspects of the UK’s obesogenic environment, the Government must tackle the multiple drivers of obesity using a whole systems approach, not just through individual responsibility via their new ‘Better Health’ social marketing campaign [17]. It has been reported that the Prime Minister’s own experience with COVID-19, which was exacerbated by his weight status, has led to this renewed commitment on obesity nationally.

Part One of the National Food Strategy has recently been released, highlighting the impact Covid-19 has had on the UK’s food system and the future scale of the obesity challenge [18]. The report looks at diet-related disease and the contribution to the UK’s high death rate, offering recommendations for rebuilding a food system post EU exit that delivers safe, healthy, sustainable and affordable food to everyone.

Despite significant budget cuts, local authorities have been working tirelessly to provide healthy and nutritious food for vulnerable groups, with a number of ‘food hubs’ being set up in local areas to support the local food response to COVID-19 [19].

Food aid charities in North-West were awarded

over £541,914 in government funding to help local people struggling to access food as a result of the pandemic, resulting in over 740,000 meals provided for people including the elderly, those fleeing domestic abuse and those who are struggling financially [20].

Following unprecedented levels of walking and cycling during the pandemic, the Government have launched a £2 billion package to boost greener, active transport and encourage more people to choose healthier alternatives when travelling. Pop-up bike lanes with protected space for cycling, wider pavements, safer junctions, and cycle and bus-only corridors will be created in England in the coming weeks [21].

Our position and what we will do

Research: We will publish the findings of our parent’s survey with the Children’s Food Campaign which provides further evidence on how lockdown life has affected children’s eating habits, and outlines parent’s priorities as children return to school.

Policy Change: We will continue to support local authorities to adopt the Local Authority Declaration on Healthy Weight, which can help to coordinate a cross-council commitment to promoting healthy weight in the local community and keep this on the agenda.

Resources: We will continue to develop resources for our [COVID-19 Resources Hub](#), which has provided support for local authorities in improving the nutritional content of food parcels distributed during the pandemic.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Government should implement its promises in the new obesity strategy with urgency, and continue to build on these measures, in order to help build more resilient and healthier communities.
- Local authorities should consider the Local Authority Declaration on Healthy Weight which provides opportunities to further embed organisational commitments to promoting healthy weight, food access and keep this as a priority issue.
- The Government should commit to sustainable funding for local authority public health to ensure that communities have access to healthy and nutritious food locally.

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