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# Sir Chris Whitty: Childhood obesity 'significantly' worse as a result of lockdowns

Chief Medical Officer describes potential for 'substantial' impact on children's health, with mental welfare and cancer rates also affected

By Laura Donnelly, HEALTH EDITOR

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416

Children could see their lives cut short because of a “significant” worsening in obesity since [the first lockdown](#), the country’s Chief Medical Officer has suggested.

Prof [Sir Chris Whitty](#) said children could face “substantial” long-term damage as a consequence of aspects of public health that have “gone backwards” in the last two years.

Sir Chris warned of a “significant” worsening in childhood obesity, with the proportion of children starting school with a weight problem rising by a fifth since the pandemic.

And he said this would have a long-term impact, increasing their risk of a host of deadly conditions, such as strokes and heart attacks, when they reach adulthood.

Latest figures show that 28 per cent of children in England are overweight or obese by the time they start primary school. The figure has shot up from 23 per cent before the pandemic.

Experts say repeated lockdowns and the lack of school routines have led to a rise in snacking, and increased consumption of junk foods, while many lives have become more sedentary.

“We really need to make sure that whatever policies we bring forward are going to have their biggest effect in the areas which are most affected by this, because the long-term effects are going to be very considerable,” Sir Chris said.

“Obesity has effects on health which you wouldn’t necessarily predict – some things are obvious, like the significant increase in risk of stroke and cardiovascular disease, but also cancers, particularly hormone driven cancers, and also infectious diseases, of which Covid was the most recent.”

“There is a very strong gradient where people who are at the higher end of the obesity spectrum have significantly worse outcomes,” he told a virtual conference run by the Local Government Association and the Association of Directors of Public Health.

Sir Chris said that evidence suggested there had already been an impact on mental health of children, with a rise in eating disorders but said far longer consequences may yet be seen.

And he said that elderly people had suffered as the result of long-periods of isolation, as loved ones kept away for fear of infecting them.

“We shouldn’t have any illusions,” he told the event. “I think there’s a big worry about the effects on mental health of particularly older people for long periods where people were lonely, because people for good public health reasons didn’t want to infect elderly or vulnerable people, but therefore they had less contact.

“That is something which we do not know the effects of, but it seems unlikely there’ll be anything other than a problem, and the impacts of disrupted schooling on some children is going to be very substantial ... the long-term effects of which it’ll be very difficult, I think, to tell.”

“Immediately, for example, it does look as if there’s been some impact on some children, and young people having eating disorders,” he said.

It came as research found [soaring rates of depression](#) and anxiety following the first lockdown.

The prevalence of diagnosed depression went from 4 per cent to 32 per cent in 2020, the University of Bath study found, while cases of anxiety went from around 5 per cent to 31 per cent.

The Chief Medical Officer also warned a significant number of cancers were likely to have been missed as a result of screening being halted during the Covid crisis, meaning cases would be caught later, when harder to treat.

Prof Whitty said he expected a rise in late presentations for breast and cervical cancer in the next two to three years.

“Screening coverage has dropped for many of the important diseases, and the risk of this is that over the next two to three years we will be facing a situation where people will be presenting with breast cancer, with cervical cancer for example, at a later stage than they

previously would have done.

“As we all know, with cancers, early diagnosis leads to much better outcomes and much more non-invasive treatments” he said.

The Chief Medical Officer said many aspects of health had gotten worse since the first lockdown.

“During the last two years obesity, particularly in children, has got significantly worse, and the reasons for this, I think, are complex,” he said, highlighting the fact that the trend affected every socioeconomic group.

The medic suggested that some changes during the pandemic had led to improvements, including a drop in air pollution. And he called for changes to make it easier for people to live more active lives and take up activities such as cycling.

Prof Whitty urged people to get on their bike – pointing out that cycling was four times more popular in the 1960s than it is now.

Around a quarter of those in our grandparents' generation got around on two wheels. But uptake has plummeted in recent decades.

“If you went back to the 50s and 60s there were extremely high rates of people cycling for work as well as recreationally, across the country, and then they fell away.

“There has been a slight increase over time, but we are nowhere near the rates seen in our grandparents' generation as a matter of routine.”

“This does demonstrate that the idea that the UK is a country that can't actually do cycling is clearly incorrect,” he said.

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