

Czechs fear pandemic inactivity swells child obesity

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Dana Gavrinevova, a sports teacher at a Prague secondary school, has watched in horror as her students have piled on weight after coronavirus restrictions required them to adopt distance learning.

Experts in the Czech Republic as in many other countries are on alert over growing evidence that the practice may turn [childhood obesity](#) into a norm.

Czech schools have been closed since last autumn, and the country recently became the world's leader in terms of the rate of coronavirus infections per 100,000 people.

"It's terrible, really. Some kids haven't left their homes for weeks. They're happy just to get up and switch on their computers," Gavrinevova told AFP.

Zlatko Marinov, a child obesity expert at Prague's Motol hospital, said a crisis is looming.

Before the pandemic struck, Marinov said the proportion of Czech [children](#) classified as overweight was "stable" at around 25 percent, of whom around 60 percent were considered obese.

He predicted a surge in the figures, adding: "We are afraid this will be serious obesity with metabolic complications."

School shutdown a 'mistake'

The Czech Republic, which has so far registered 1.2 million cases and nearly 20,000 deaths, is second in the world after neighbouring Slovakia for new deaths per capita, according to an AFP tally.

The government has closed restaurants, most shops, but also sports centres and training facilities.

Schools have been closed nonstop since October, with the exception of kindergartens and the first and second years of elementary [school](#).

"The decrease in child and adult physical activity as a result of government restrictions is remarkable," said Jiri Suchy, a professor of sports didactics at Charles University in Prague.

He insists the government made a "mistake" when it closed schools and urged people to stay at home.

"The ban on sports classes, group sports and guided training clearly has a fatal impact on the physical shape of... children and youths," Suchy told AFP.

'Walk the dog at least'

In its State of the World's Children report for 2019, UNICEF warned that child obesity was growing worldwide, with the proportion of overweight children aged 5 to 19 growing from 10 to almost 20 percent between 2000 and 2016.

Overweight children are at greater risk of type 2 diabetes, stigmatisation and depression, and of being obese as adults.

Obesity-related diseases such as [heart problems](#) and diabetes are among the most frequent causes of death or disabilities in the developed world.

The Czech government recently contemplated reopening schools for more students as of March, but it has changed its mind because of the upswing in daily infections.

Marinov disagrees, saying: "Children should return to schools as fast as possible, under security measures but with sports.

"Children are not a stationary organism, they are developing and they won't learn sensible physical activities at home."

Gavrinevova said she had her students perform stretches in front of their computers and record videos of themselves riding bikes, skating or skiing—their alternatives to cancelled sports classes.

"But there are many who don't understand why they should be doing this," she said.

"So in the end I ask them, stand up, go and walk the dog at least."

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