

# Impact of lockdown on Scottish eye care

September 20 2021

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Professor Alexandros Zangelidis. Credit: University of Aberdeen

New research from the University of Aberdeen has highlighted the damaging impact of COVID-19 restrictions on Scottish eye care and the potential for long-term sight damage and reduced detection of other health conditions.

A study, led by Prof Alexandros Zangelidis, Personal Chair in Economics, has examined the relationship between eye examinations in Scotland and follow-up referrals to a GP or hospital, which have been significantly disrupted by COVID-19.

Previous studies led by the Aberdeen research team identified the benefits of improved uptake of routine eye tests in Scotland in detecting other health conditions, such as hypertension.

But COVID-19 restrictions meant many people missed routine eye appointments and this had a significant impact on referrals onto other services when issues were picked up at these appointments. According to a recent report from the NHS Confederation, there have been 30% fewer new referrals to treatment in 2020, compared to 2019.

Professor Zangelidis' findings highlight the key role played by optometrists at high-street optician practices in reducing pressures on other parts of the NHS and how significantly this balance is tipped when those services are unavailable.

The research found that for curative pathways—where conditions are treated in high-street services—when 10% more examinations are conducted here, there is a 5% drop in referrals to GPs or hospitals.

It also demonstrated the significance of the link between regular eye examinations and the detection of often asymptomatic, conditions, such as glaucoma, diabetes and hypertension, that warrant further investigation or treatment. The study concluded that a 10% increase in supplementary eye examinations is associated with 8.6% more referrals to GP or hospital for early intervention measures.

Professor Zangelidis said: "When we can set out the benefits in this way, what we can also see are the negatives in reducing high-street optometry

services through lock-down or other COVID-19 restrictions.

"Eye [health](#) conditions if left undetected and thus untreated, are expected to steadily deteriorate and lead to long-term damage to eye health and sight loss. The findings highlight the wider repercussions that temporary suspension of eye examinations and patients' reluctance to have an eye examination during the pandemic may have on eye health.

"One of the specialties most affected has been ophthalmology, raising significant concerns about eye health of patients in the long-term and the impact of this on the detection of other conditions such as diabetes, which can be detected via routine eye examination."

Professor Zangelidis suggests more now needs to be done to encourage greater uptake of [eye examinations](#) and that any potential reduction or temporary suspension in high-street optometry services needs to be carefully weighed against potential future measures to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

"This study is the first to estimate the magnitude of this effect," he added. "This will help [policy makers](#) to assess the potential adverse effects that any future interruption of eyecare services may have, as eye conditions will remain untreated and may further deteriorate.

"Everyone should be strongly encouraged to regularly have an eye examination. This will help in the early detection and treatment of health conditions and in releasing pressure from NHS resources."

Provided by University of Aberdeen

Citation: Impact of lockdown on Scottish eye care (2021, September 20) retrieved 11 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-09-impact-lockdown-scottish-eye.html>

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