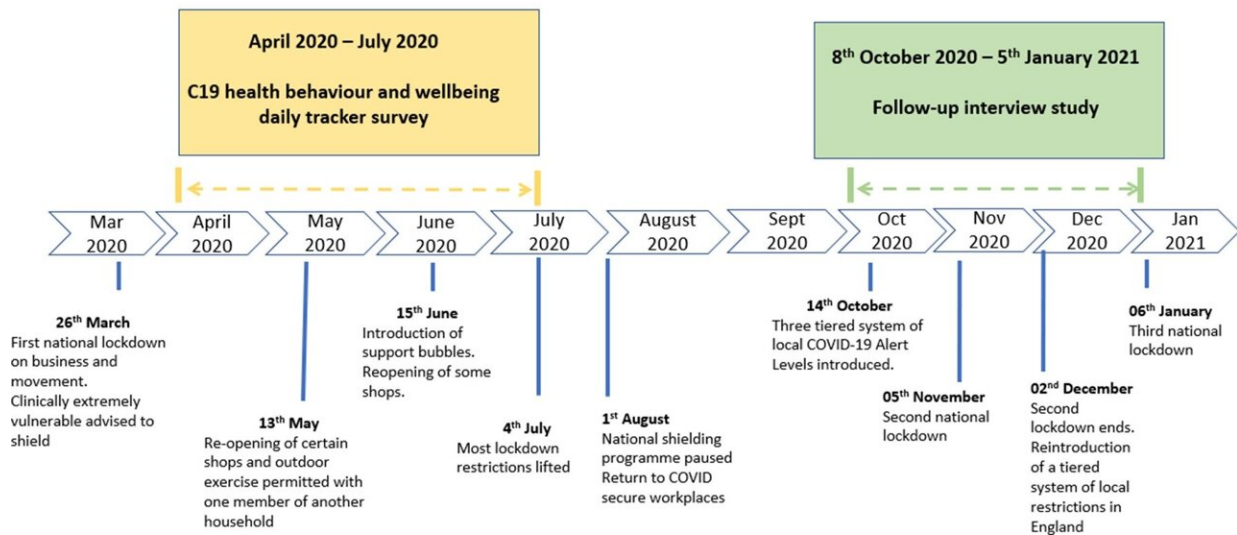


Study using daily surveys reveals the lasting impact of COVID lockdowns

March 23 2022

Study Timeline



Credit: *British Journal of Health Psychology* (2022). DOI: 10.1111/bjhp.12592

New research from the University of East Anglia reveals first-hand the lasting impact that lockdowns may have had on people's mental and physical health.

The UK's first COVID [lockdown](#) was announced by Prime Minister Boris Johnson exactly two years ago today.

Just a few days later, researchers at UEA launched a major project to track the mental and physical health of the nation through lockdowns and beyond.

More than 1,000 participants carried out daily surveys—with questions on a range of lifestyle behaviors including physical activity, diet, sleep, smoking, drinking, and drug use.

Some of the participants were then interviewed by the research team, to try to understand what was happening for people from their own viewpoints.

New findings published today show how people responded very differently to social restrictions depending on their existing circumstances.

For those who were less well-off to start with, adapting to lockdown was more difficult, and health behaviors typically worsened to a greater extent.

In contrast, those who were better off at the start of the pandemic demonstrated faster adaptation and were more able to respond positively to restrictions, for example by taking to online exercise classes.

It is likely that any lasting impact to mental and [physical health](#) will therefore be much greater for those who were worse off to start with.

Those with good social links and healthy behaviors already in place described in their interviews how they were able to adapt to lockdown and thrive, whereas some of the more vulnerable in our communities had fallen into unhealthy spirals.

Prof Caitlin Notley, from UEA's Norwich Medical School, said: "When

the first lockdown was announced back in 2020, we started surveying participants from around the UK daily. Our initial results showed that people were eating less fruit and veg, getting less exercise and drinking more alcohol. It quickly became apparent that lockdown may have lasting consequences for the physical and mental health of the nation. We wanted to see whether people's lifestyles changed in the long-term so we continued the study by carrying out regular surveys with the participants, and interviewing some people to find out more."

Now, two years on, the team's results show how health inequalities are likely to have widened.

Prof Notley said: "Social restrictions imposed as a result of the coronavirus pandemic have had a significant impact on health behaviors at the individual and population level. It's fair to say that all of our participants' lives were disrupted by lockdown and they were forced to adapt. But people responded to the lockdowns very differently and their experiences of social restrictions varied considerably.

"Fundamentally, people were hindered or helped by their existing support structures and resources, such as access to technology to engage with the outside world, or private outdoor space. Those people who had good friends, community links and who were already health conscious, were able to respond positively and better able to cope.

"They were able to adapt to the 'new normal,' use technology to keep in touch with friends and relatives, order veg boxes, carry on with a [healthy diet](#) and take part in healthy pursuits in new and innovative ways such as online fitness classes or 'doing Joe Wicks.'

"But lockdowns are very likely to have caused a sustained widening of social and health inequalities. Those who remained in work outside the home, or who were retired, were the least impacted overall. But those

who were unemployed, younger, on a [lower income](#), clinically unwell or told to fully shield were particularly impacted by strict restrictions.

"For these more [vulnerable people](#), supportive social factors were taken away or severely restricted. Anxiety and depression worsened, and unhealthy behaviors like exercising less, drinking more alcohol, and eating a poor diet increased. As we work through the 'roadmap to recovery,' emphasis needs to be placed on a collaborative, community-based approach, with a focus on what makes us well.

"Encouraging membership of community exercise groups, for example, may help those most impacted to engage again with healthy behaviors to keep them well. We also need to pay attention to how those who are less well-off responded more negatively to the policy of lockdown, so that lessons can be learnt for the future," she added.

"Disruption and adaptation in response to the coronavirus pandemic—assets as contextual moderators of enactment of [health](#) behaviors" is published in the *British Journal of Health Psychology*.

More information: Caitlin Notley et al, Disruption and adaptation in response to the coronavirus pandemic – Assets as contextual moderators of enactment of health behaviours, *British Journal of Health Psychology* (2022). [DOI: 10.1111/bjhp.12592](https://doi.org/10.1111/bjhp.12592)

Provided by University of East Anglia

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