



Impact of COVID-19 on general practitioner contacts with children and young people

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About the research

Health system shocks during COVID-19 enforced a complete national lockdown beginning in March 2020. A UK wide campaign asked the public to **Stay at home, Protect the NHS and Save lives**. The National Health Service (NHS) recommended remote triaging before face-to-face contact to protect patients and staff, prevent the spread of transmissible infections and to conserve health resources for the most pressing problems. Essential services were prioritised while routine appointments for planned and preventive care were suspended as the UK locked down on 23rd March 2020.

Children's access to primary care is highly sensitive to changes in the health care system. Early in the pandemic it became clear that children were less likely to become seriously unwell from COVID-19 than adults. During March 2020, primary care consultations fell 30% overall. However, it was unclear if reported falls and changes in consulting from face-to-face to remote contacts with general practitioners (GPs) affected children and young people in the same way as reported for adults.

We used data from GP practices in England to answer these questions examining more than 47 million electronic health records from 4.3 million children and young people aged 0-24 years in England before and during pandemic lockdowns from 2015 to 2020.



Policy implications

Future of Primary Care; hybrid consulting?

Our findings showed GPs delivered sustained support throughout the first lockdown by adopting a hybrid model of face to face and remote consulting for transmissible and non-transmissible conditions.

Primary care workforce and infrastructure expansion is urgently needed.¹

Temporary suspension of non-urgent care may have created a backlog for some children with long term conditions. Lockdowns therefore led to extra workload and costs for GPs in implementing additional safety protocols and teleconsulting. Wider evidence shows unprecedented burn-out and low morale and losses to the health profession as demand increases again. Investment is urgently required to improve primary care digital infrastructure.

The health needs of children and young people should be included in post pandemic recovery plans.

Our study showed falls in contacts exceeded that reported for adults. Although lockdown measures temporarily lowered GP contacts, particularly for respiratory illnesses, demand is rising again as hitherto unexposed cohorts of children are now experiencing transmissible infectious illness.

Future research

Effectiveness and feasibility of new models of primary care consulting needs assessment. More research is needed to determine safety, feasibility and acceptability of hybrid models for children and families and practitioner workload.

1. Workforce: recruitment, training and retention in health and social care. Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/23246/documents/169640/default/> Published 25 July 2022.

Key findings

Children and young people's contacts with GPs in England dropped by 41%, during the first COVID-19 lockdown from March to June 2020 compared with previous years. Children aged 1-14 years had greater falls in overall contacts with GPs compared with infants and those aged 15-24 years.

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Key findings continued

Although the stay-at-home advice meant that face-to-face contacts with those aged 0 to 24 years fell by 88%, a more than two-fold increase in telephone, video or online (remote) contacts enabled GPs to provide first contact care throughout the pandemic period.

There were large falls in contacts with GPs for respiratory illnesses, which is partially explained by children getting fewer viral infections. In contrast, for conditions such as diabetes or urinary tract infections, which were less affected by the lockdown, GP contacts had lesser overall falls (although there was a large shift from face-to-face to remote).

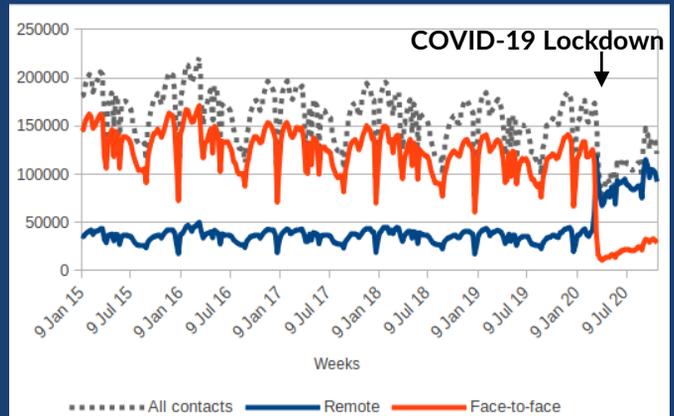
Despite the challenges of the pandemic, these findings indicate that GPs largely continued to provide accessible care for children and young people.

Further information

The full article can be accessed here: <https://doi.org/10.3399/BJGP.2021.0643>

This project is part of a larger SPHR funded work package: <https://nihrsphr.link/ChildHealth>

Children's GP contacts Jan 2015 – Oct 2020



About the School

The NIHR School for Public Health Research is a partnership between the Universities of Sheffield; Bristol; Cambridge; Imperial; and University College London; The London School for Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM); LiLaC – a collaboration between the Universities of Liverpool and Lancaster; and Fuse - The Centre for Translational Research in Public Health a collaboration between Newcastle, Durham, Northumbria, Sunderland and Teesside Universities.

Lockdown reduced children's contacts with GPs but increased remote appointments

4 million children 0-24 years

Children's contacts with GPs in England fell during the first covid-19 lockdown (March-June 2020)



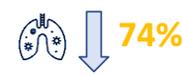
More than a two-fold rise in telephone, online and video contacts mitigated falls in face-to-face contacts



Lesser falls for common non-transmissible conditions



Huge falls in contacts for respiratory illnesses



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