

Scientists sound the alarm: Lockdowns may escalate the obesity epidemic

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Emotional stress, economic anxiety, physical inactivity and social distance—locking down society to combat COVID-19 creates psychosocial insecurity that leads to obesity, warn three Danish researchers. Counter measures are needed if we are to keep the public both metabolically healthy and safe from the coronavirus

Rates of obesity may explode because of strategies to limit the spread of COVID-19, warn a trio of researchers at the University of Copenhagen and Aarhus University. Investment in obesity research will help inform counter strategies that people eating healthily, feeling happy and staying active, while also combatting COVID-19.

"We are concerned that [policy makers](#) do not fully understand how strategies such as lockdowns and business closures could fuel the rise of obesity—a chronic disease with severe health implications, but with few reliable treatment options," says Associate Professor Christoffer Clemmensen, from the Novo Nordisk Foundation Center for Basic Metabolic Research (CBMR), at the University of Copenhagen.

Alone, inactive and hungry

In a letter published in the scientific journal *Nature Reviews Endocrinology*, Clemmensen and two co-authors outlined how COVID-19 containment strategies could increase rates of obesity.

Firstly, it is well documented that people with limited economic resources are more likely eat highly-processed and energy-rich food. These foods have been shown to stimulate people's appetites, so that they end up eating more calories than they need.

"It is likely that more people will turn to these forms of food, as more people lose their jobs and experience [economic hardship](#)," says co-author Professor Michael Bang Petersen, from the Department of Political Science at Aarhus University.

Secondly, physical distancing increases anxiety by limiting our ability to socially interact. Feelings of loneliness and isolation, combined with confinement within a home setting, can impact our food behavior and lead us to overeat. This effect is compounded by lower levels of physical activity, as people are urged to work from home and venture out as little as possible.

Stopping the virus and protecting metabolic health

Co-author Professor Thorkild I.A. Sørensen from CBMR at the University of Copenhagen, stresses that we still do not exactly understand how a person's mental health and economic status end up increasing a person's risk of developing obesity.

"We know that there are links between obesity and a person's class and mental health, but we don't exactly understand how they make an impact," says Sørensen.

More research is needed to uncover the cause and effect, but the three co-authors say the scientific expectations are clear: physical distancing and rising rates of unemployment should lead us to expect increased rates of [obesity](#).

Together they urge governments and decision makers to consider what impact COVID-19 containment strategies, such as lockdowns, will have on the public's metabolic health. With this in mind, counter strategies should be considered to ensure that the public remains healthy, happy and active—and also safe from the coronavirus.

More information: Christoffer Clemmensen et al, Will the COVID-19 pandemic worsen the obesity epidemic?, *Nature Reviews Endocrinology* (2020).
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