



The BMJ

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2020;370:m3182<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.m3182>

Published: 11 August 2020

Covid lockdown: England sees fewer cases of colds, flu, and bronchitis

Gareth Iacobucci

Cases of common cold, flu, and other respiratory diseases in England are substantially lower than average for this time of year, GP surveillance data show.

The Royal College of General Practitioners, which published the figures, derived from data from 500 practices across England,¹ said that lockdown and physical distancing measures to prevent the spread of covid-19 were the probable cause of the trend.

But although there were fewer respiratory diseases and other viral infections for this time of year than in previous years, the college said that since lockdown measures have eased recorded rates of illnesses such as the common cold have begun to rise as more people start to return to their general practice seeking medical treatment.

Figures for the week ending 2 August show that there were 5.7 cases of common cold per 100 000 people. This was up from 4.7 the previous week but still around nine times fewer cases than the five year average for this time of year. The data also show a decrease in the incidence of covid-19 in England to 4.3 per 100 000 in the week ending 2 August, down from 5.8 the previous week.

Martin Marshall, chair of the royal college, said, “We would expect to see a drop in influenza-like illness during the warmer months, but the latest figures from our research and surveillance centre, which collects data from more than 500 GP practices in England, shows that it’s lower than the five year average for this time of year.

“The social distancing measures we have seen over the last few months and an increased public emphasis on maintaining good hygiene have probably played their part, but we also know that some patients have been reluctant to use the NHS during covid-19 because they haven’t wanted to overburden services at a time of crisis or are afraid of catching the virus.”

But he added, “Now that lockdown measures are being eased, the number of people seeking medical assistance from their GP is returning to normal, and we have started to see rates of illnesses such as the common cold increasing.”

Marshall said that this showed the importance of maintaining good hygiene measures to protect not only against covid-19 but also other common winter illnesses. “It’s also vital that patients who are eligible for a flu jab receive one—particularly those in at-risk groups,” he added.

Commenting on the data, Azeem Majeed, professor of public health at Imperial College London and a GP, told *The BMJ*, “It’s positive news as this reduces illness in the community and pressures on the NHS.

“Moving into winter, it will be important to maintain the use of measures such as face masks and social distancing. This will help reduce the likelihood of a double burden of covid-19 and influenza in the winter.

“We will also need a very high covid-19 testing capacity, as respiratory infection rates will inevitably increase during the winter (even if not to the levels seen in previous years), and the symptoms of other infections will be difficult to separate those from covid-19.”

¹ Royal College of General Practitioners. RSC: Communicable and respiratory disease report for England. 2020. https://www.rcgp.org.uk/-/media/Files/CIRC/WeeklyReport_Summer_wk31_2020.ashx.