



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Press Release

Issued: **Monday 8 February 2021**

UNDER STRICT EMBARGO until 00:05 GMT Tuesday 9 February 2021

Lockdown linked to drop in asthma attacks, GP data suggests

Asthma attack rates seen at GP surgeries fell significantly during the first Covid-19 pandemic lockdown of 2020, a study suggests.

Lower levels of air pollution, fewer cold and flu infections, and the fear of attending doctor surgeries due to Covid-19 were possible reasons for the 20pc drop in cases seen at GP surgeries, researchers said.

The study is the first national review of lockdown effects on asthma attacks and includes data from more than 100,000 patients.

Asthma attacks – or exacerbations – are bouts of shortness of breath, wheezing or a tight chest. There are usually more than six million GP consultations and 1400 deaths attributed to asthma in the UK every year.

For the study researchers from the University of Edinburgh looked at a national GP database containing information on almost 10 million patients, and identified 100,165 who had had at least one asthma attack since 2016.

The team counted GP visits for asthma attacks in weekly blocks from January to August 2020, and compared with weekly rates for January to August 2016-2019. They used March 23 2020 as the lockdown start date.

Drops in GP visits for asthma attacks during the lockdown were seen across all age groups, for both men and women, and across all regions of England excluding London and the North East.

There was no reduction in the rate of asthma attacks that led to a hospital visit, suggesting that only milder attacks were reduced during the pandemic.

The researchers caution that some patients could have gone to hospital without a GP referral, which may mask higher rates of asthma attacks than recorded by GP surgeries.

The study was conducted in association with BREATHE - The Health Data Research Hub for Respiratory Health, NIHR and the Asthma UK Centre for Applied Research. It is published in the journal *Thorax*.

Lead researcher Dr Ahmar Shah, Chancellor's Fellow at the University of Edinburgh's Usher Institute, said: "Asthma is a chronic condition that affects over five million people in the UK and until now, we didn't know how these patients were being affected by lockdown. The data shows an overall reduction in asthma attacks seen at the GP."

"However, it is not clear whether this was an actual improvement in asthma due to reduced pollution and fewer opportunities for other viruses to spread or whether patients were reluctant to attend their doctor's surgery during the pandemic. Further research will help explain the reasons behind our findings."

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