

Delaying first Covid lockdown may have inadvertently saved more lives than it cost

Cambridge expert argues that countries that locked down early delayed part of their first wave, resulting in higher overall mortality

By [Henry Bodkin](#), HEALTH AND SCIENCE CORRESPONDENT 21 March 2021 • 8:00pm



Boris Johnson has been heavily criticised for only imposing the national restrictions on March 23 last year CREDIT: Isabel Infantes/Getty Images Contributor

[Delaying the first lockdown](#) may have inadvertently saved more lives than it cost, according to a new analysis.

Boris Johnson has been heavily criticised for only [imposing the national restrictions on March 23](#) last year – at least nine days after he knew that the NHS would not be able to cope if coronavirus was allowed to rampage unchecked.

A number of scientists and opposition politicians [have claimed](#) that delaying the decision caused tens of thousands of unnecessary deaths.

However, a University of Cambridge expert now argues that countries that locked down early effectively delayed part of their first wave until the winter, resulting in higher overall mortality.

Dr Raghieb Ali, a senior clinical research associate at the university's MRC Epidemiology Unit, said Britain's relatively late lockdown meant more people were infected in the spring, when underlying pressure on the NHS was relatively light, meaning they were protected by antibodies come winter – when the service traditionally struggles to cope.

[Writing for The Telegraph](#), he said that, in the absence of a vaccine, lockdowns postpone infections rather than prevent them, suggesting that March and April was a better period in which to catch the virus.

Many of the claims that Britain's late lockdown exacerbated the death toll have been made using the statistical models [that urged the measure in the first place](#).

In contrast, Dr Ali, also a professor public health at New York University, compared the UK to European countries with similar populations, age structures, seasons and healthcare systems. While Norway and Finland, which locked down a week before the UK, have both had small first and second wave death tolls, these are exceptions, he said.

"What happened in many other countries in Europe who also locked down and closed their borders at the same time is that they did have very small first waves in spring 2020 but this was followed by much larger second waves in autumn/winter 2021 and now into spring 2021 too," he wrote.

"And this has happened despite second and third lockdowns in many of these countries as people understandably struggled to maintain compliance with restrictions for months on end.

"But based on current trends it seems likely that many of these countries that we thought were doing well due to their early lockdowns and small first waves will end up having higher excess mortality than the UK, including Czech Republic, Poland, Portugal, and many others."

Dr Ali also argued that closing borders has emerged to be a key intervention in controlling the virus, pointing out that the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (Sage) opposed the policy last year.

However, he concluded that even if ministers had ignored the body's advice and closed the borders last March, it would have been too late.

"The point is that getting the timing of lockdowns right is not straightforward, especially when you have to balance their very significant harms against their benefit, and there really is not good evidence that an earlier lockdown would have saved lives," he said.

The road to lockdown

- **Dec 31, 2019**

The Wuhan Municipal Health Commission posts information on its website about a cluster of 27 cases of a pneumonia-like illness in the city of 11 million people. The alert is spotted by the World Health Organisation and the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

- **Jan 8, 2020**

First reports in UK press of China identifying a new strain of coronavirus as the mystery illness continues to affect people in Wuhan.

- **Jan 22, 2020**

The Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (Sage) meets to discuss Covid for the first time. It advises against border checks and says there are "no

practical preventative measures the HM Government might undertake ahead of Chinese New Year” on Jan 25.

- **Jan 27, 2020**

Matt Hancock, the Health Secretary, tells the Commons 200 British citizens trapped in Wuhan will be offered repatriation. The following day the FCO advises against all travel to mainland China.

- **Jan 28, 2020**

Sage meets for a second time, and notes there is some evidence that asymptomatic transmission of the virus is occurring.

- **Jan 29, 2020**

British Airways suspends all flights to and from mainland China, but the Government decides to allow flights to continue.

- **Jan 30, 2020**



Peter Attwood, 84, from Chatham, in Kent, becomes the first person in the UK to die of Covid-19, though it will take another seven months for tests to discover this.

- **Jan 31, 2020**

What were, at the time, thought to be the first two cases of Covid-19 are confirmed in the UK as two Chinese nationals staying in a hotel in York. They are taken to hospital in Newcastle.

- **Feb 13, 2020**

Sage meets and decides “there is no current evidence to suggest prevention of mass gatherings is effective in limiting transmission”.

- **Feb 17, 2020**

British holidaymakers head for the ski slopes as half-term holiday begins. They are later found to have helped seed Covid around the UK on their return.

- **March 2, 2020**

Government holds Cobra meeting to discuss the crisis.

- **March 5, 2020**

Number of cases passes 100. UK moves from “containment” to “delay” phase of pandemic plan. Sage meets and again agrees there is no evidence to suggest banning large gatherings would reduce transmission. Closing bars

and restaurants would have an impact but would be “very difficult to implement”, the scientists say.

- **March 8, 2020**

Amid growing questions about whether the UK should follow Italy’s example by imposing a lockdown, a senior government source briefs the media that the Italian approach is based on “populist, non-science based measures that aren’t any use,” adding: “They’re who not to follow.”

- **March 10, 2020**



Four-day Cheltenham Festival begins, despite concerns – later justified – that it would lead to a further spread of the virus.

- **March 11, 2020**

As Rishi Sunak presents his first Budget, with £30 billion to protect the economy from the effects of coronavirus, ministers meet to discuss increasing hospital surge capacity and agree that patients should be discharged wherever possible, including to care homes. Meanwhile, Jenny Harries, the deputy chief medical officer, says the Government is “following the science” by allowing mass gatherings to continue.

- **March 12, 2020**

UK chief medical officers raise the threat level from moderate to high. Public Health England stops carrying out contact tracing, arguing that capacity has become overwhelmed.

- **March 13, 2020**

Sir Patrick Vallance, the chief scientific adviser, says the country needs to build up “herd immunity”, only for ministers to say that is not government policy. Sage members unanimously agree that “measures seeking to completely suppress spread of Covid-19 will cause a second peak”.

- **March 14, 2020**

At an emergency meeting in Downing St, Ben Warner, a data analyst, presents evidence that the NHS will be overwhelmed within weeks after discovering the “squash the sombrero” policy is failing to keep the virus in check. The number of confirmed cases rises to 1,061, a five-fold increase in the space of a week.

- **March 15, 2020**
UK death toll passes 100. Matt Hancock says everyone over the age of 70 will be told to shield themselves “within the coming weeks”.
- **March 16, 2020**
Boris Johnson tells the public to stay away from pubs and restaurants but he decides not to close them. He also advises against large gatherings and non-essential travel.
- **March 18, 2020**
School closures announced for the week beginning March 23.
- **March 20, 2020**
Rishi Sunak unveils furlough scheme to pay 80 per cent of wages of employees who cannot work.
- **March 23, 2020**



As the death toll reaches 938, Boris Johnson tells the country: “You must stay at home,” as he announces the first national lockdown.