

21099 Thirty-year failure to tackle preventable disease fuelling global Covid pandemic

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The failure of governments to tackle a three-decade rise in preventable diseases such as obesity and type 2 diabetes has fuelled the Covid-19 pandemic and is stalling life expectancy around the world, a comprehensive study has found.

The latest data from the Global Burden of Disease study, published in the *Lancet* medical journal, is from 2019, before Covid, but helps explain the world's vulnerability to the virus.

In the UK, the editor of the *Lancet*, Dr Richard Horton, said, the areas where life expectancy was lowest – the north-east, north-west, Yorkshire and Humberside – were the areas hardest hit by Covid. "I don't think it's a coincidence," he said, adding that Covid-19 was not a single pandemic, but "a synthesis of a coronavirus and an epidemic of non-communicable diseases on a background of poverty and inequality.

More people worldwide are experiencing high blood pressure and high blood sugar, are overweight or have high cholesterol, all linked to poor diet and lack of exercise, and all risk factors for disease. There is a rising tide of deaths from cardiovascular disease, particularly in the US and the Caribbean.

The world might be approaching a turning point in life expectancy gains, the authors said. Since 1990, life expectancy has risen steadily, but that has slowed. In the UK, life expectancy has increased, but not as fast as in the rest of Europe, at 5.3 years compared with the European average of 5.7.

"If we are truly to protect our communities from the ravages of this coronavirus, governments must devise national strategies, not only to reduce the prevalence of the virus, but also to more assertively address the burden of chronic disease, and the risk factors for chronic disease," Horton said.

Prof Christopher Murray, director of the Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) in Seattle, in the US, said health systems had been slow to adapt to the implications of the rise in long-term chronic, non-communicable diseases.

Looking to the future, he said: "We expect Covid to continue to have its direct effects in 2021 and for those to be quite considerable." Childhood vaccination rates have gone down because families cannot get to clinics, women are not able to give birth in safe facilities, and people needing treatment for diseases other than Covid are not getting it. The economic effects would be a driver of poor health for three or four years to come, he said.