

## Easing of COVID-19 social restrictions in England comes at a cost

COVID-19 social restrictions should ease faster in England as the vaccination rate increases, say authors of an economic analysis published in the *International Journal of Clinical Practice*.

Official weekly and monthly values published in England in 2020/21 were used to estimate the impact of seasonal restrictions and low, medium and high social restrictions on the spread of COVID-19 infections across age groups on the English economy and healthcare service utilisation. An economic model populated with these data and the potential impact of COVID-19 vaccinations based on past infections and reported COVID-19 deaths in 2020 and early 2021 was used to estimate the potential impact of different speeds of easing social restrictions from March to August 2021 on the gross domestic product (GDP) in England and National Health Service (NHS) utilisation and costs. The base-case model assumed vaccination uptake of 90% and 80% in patients over and under 65 years of age, respectively.

The roll-out of COVID-19 vaccinations would significantly reduce hospitalisations and deaths. The current strategy of slow easing of social restrictions over the next 4 months was estimated to avert 57 000 life-years lost compared with rapid easing of restrictions, at a cost in terms of GDP impact of £0.4 million per life-year saved, which is over 10 times greater than the usual public health willingness-to-pay threshold per QALY saved. Under various social restriction scenarios, the estimated reduction in GDP ranged from £19 to £95 million, while corresponding life-years lost were 84 050 and 26 920, respectively.

"The current strategy of relatively slow easing comes at a cost in terms of GDP reduction of up to £400,000/life-year - over 10 times higher than the normal public health expenditure limit used to evaluate health resources spent against Quality Adjusted Life Years saved. This should be taken into account in any policy decisions going forward," said the authors. "The return of NHS activity to the previous 'normal' levels will also be slower and has a yet unclear impact on future population health outcomes and mortality in all strata of society," they added.