



Is There a Need to Assess the Health Status of School-Age Students When Reopening Schools Following the COVID-19 Pandemic?

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Dear Editor,

Physical activity is a broad term that encompasses all human motion at home, school, the workplace, and the community.¹ As indicated in the Bangkok Declaration of the International Society for Physical Activity and Health (ISPAH), physical activity benefits both individuals and society, contributing to many of the United Nations sustainable developmental goals.² Physical activity is associated with positive health outcomes in children and adolescents, whereas excessive time spent on sedentary activities is related to negative health outcomes.³ Concerns about diminishing levels of physical activity and their impact on health outcomes have driven various national and international regulatory bodies to create guidelines with recommendations for policymakers, practitioners, and individuals over the last three decades.⁴ Therefore, the World Health Assembly has established two goals: a 10% decrease in worldwide physical inactivity by 2025; and a 15% decrease by 2030.⁵ Due to the health advantages of regular physical activity, the World Health Organization (WHO) recommends that individuals aged 5–17 years engage in at least 60 minutes of moderate-to vigorous-intensity physical activity every day throughout the week.² In addition, vigorous-intensity activities, including aerobic and activities that strengthen bones and muscles, should be performed at least three days a week.⁵

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has spread globally in the last two years, and several governments have decided to close schools as part of a physical distancing policy to limit transmission and relieve pressure on health systems.⁶ Nearly 60 million students have been deprived of essential educational and health services as a result of these closures.² The COVID-19 pandemic has affected various aspects of lifestyle, including physical activity.

Prior to the school closings and sports cancellations, it was commonly accepted that organized sports participation had a significant positive impact on adolescent students' health and well-being.⁵ Global progress in increasing physical activity has been slow, even before the COVID-19 pandemic.⁷ Prior to COVID-19, it was estimated that one-fourth of adults and four-fifths of teenagers worldwide were inadequately active.⁷ Furthermore, COVID-19 may worsen physical inactivity and restrict access to organized sports, both of which have long been recognized as serious public health concerns.⁶

According to recent studies, individuals have spent more time at home during COVID-19 to avoid spreading the virus, and physical activity levels decreased by 30% while sitting time increased by 30%.⁶ The length of the enforcement of these regulations and policies has increased overall screen time among children and adolescents.⁸ Obesity may be associated with an increase in sedentary behavior and screen time, as well as a reduction in physical activity.⁹ COVID-19-related commentary on these topics has been offered by several authors throughout the world.¹⁰ Many experts have emphasized the necessity of improving healthy living habits,⁶ while others have stated that we are currently facing not one, but two pandemics at the same time (i.e., COVID-19 and physical inactivity).⁹ Unless we take immediate action to enhance physical activity levels during and post COVID-19, we risk aggravating the effects of the current epidemic by increasing childhood physical inactivity.¹¹ The term "covibesity" was introduced to describe the increase in obesity rates caused by the pandemic's lockdown.¹² Furthermore, the term "COFIT-19" was developed to underline the importance of being physically active during the COVID-19 pandemic¹¹ (Figure 1).

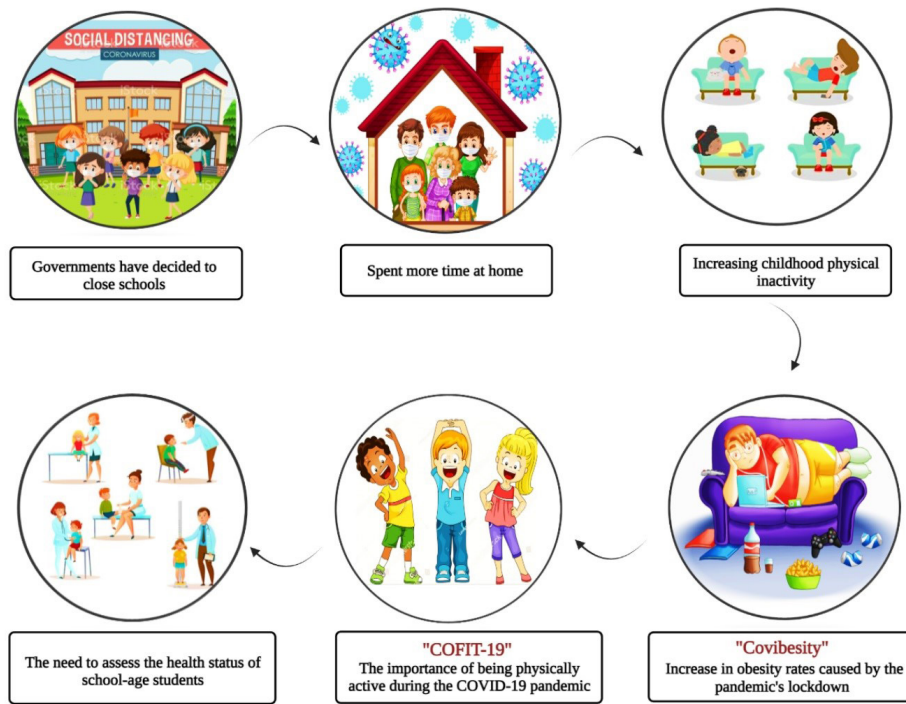


Figure 1. Interrelationships between school closures, health, wellness, and obesity.

Since schools are gradually reopening, however, there has been minimal research on the need of monitoring student health-related risk factors such as musculoskeletal discomfort and weight status in the school environment. Future initiatives for schools should be to focus on assessing physical activity and health status of school-age students on return to the school environment. Assessments should include aerobic performance, musculoskeletal and body weight measures. This would provide valuable information to identify students with negative health characteristics. The information would be informative for staff to provide appropriate interventions and advice following school reopening's. The involvement of schools in the physical activity and health agenda is extremely important post pandemic, and these suggestions should help minimize the long-term effects of inactivity, overweight, and obesity in this population.

Conflict of Interest Disclosures

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interests.

Ethical Approval

Not applicable.

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