

## Impact of the Pandemic on the Prevalence of Mental Disorders: An Updated Review

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### ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought significant changes to global social, economic and healthcare dynamics, creating numerous challenges for population mental health. This article reviews recent studies on the impact of the pandemic on the prevalence of mental disorders such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and substance abuse. In addition to discussing the determining factors and the most vulnerable groups, we address the intervention strategies implemented during the pandemic period. The results suggest a significant increase in mental disorder rates, highlighting the need for effective public policies for prevention and treatment in the post-pandemic era.

**Keywords:** Anxiety; COVID-19; Depression; Pandemic; Mental disorders

### Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, declared in March 2020 by the World Health Organization (WHO), triggered an unprecedented global public health crisis. Beyond high morbidity and mortality rates, social isolation, economic instability and uncertainty about the future directly impacted people's mental well-being worldwide<sup>1</sup>. Emerging studies indicate that psychological conditions significantly deteriorated during the pandemic, with increases in cases of mental disorders such as anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)<sup>2,3</sup>. Social isolation, imposed as a measure to control the spread of the virus, was one of the main factors contributing to the worsening of global

mental health. Disconnection from family and friends, the closure of social spaces and the limitation of routine activities created an environment conducive to increased loneliness and distress. Additionally, the emotional burden on frontline healthcare professionals, the fear of infection and the loss of loved ones further exacerbated the situation<sup>4</sup>.

Another relevant aspect is the evidence that the pandemic's impact was disproportionate among different groups, more severely affecting those in vulnerable situations, such as frontline workers, individuals with pre-existing medical conditions and socioeconomically disadvantaged populations<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, children, adolescents and the elderly faced specific

challenges that exacerbated psychological issues. Even before the pandemic, mental health was an underestimated public health issue in many countries. WHO estimates indicated that approximately 264 million people suffered from depression in 2019, a number that has significantly increased since then<sup>6</sup>. The situation was further worsened by the collapse of healthcare systems, which were often unprepared to handle the growing demand for psychological support<sup>7,8</sup>. In this context, it is essential to understand the factors that contributed to the worsening of mental disorders during health crises.

## Objectives

This article aims to analyze the relationship between the pandemic and the increase in the prevalence of mental disorders, as well as identify the most affected population groups and the associated risk factors.

## Materials and Methods

A bibliographic review of articles published in the PUBMED, ScienceDirect, Scielo and PsycINFO databases was conducted to support this study.

## Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic represented an unprecedented collective stressor with global impacts on mental health. Reviewed studies indicate that the prevalence of mental disorders, such as anxiety and depression, doubled compared to pre-pandemic periods<sup>9</sup>. This increase was attributed to various factors, including social isolation, financial uncertainty and emotional overload. Additionally, traumatic events such as family losses and hospitalizations intensified PTSD symptoms in many populations. Healthcare workers were particularly affected, facing high levels of burnout and anxiety. Similarly, already vulnerable populations, including racial minorities and individuals with pre-existing medical conditions, experienced a disproportionate impact<sup>10</sup>. Children and adolescents, deprived of social interaction and in-person education, exhibited concerning increases in behavioral and mental health issues<sup>11</sup>.

Emerging interventions, such as the use of technology to provide remote psychological support, demonstrated partial effectiveness. However, access barriers to technology and digital inequalities limited their impact<sup>12</sup>. Community support programs and psychoeducation strategies also showed potential but remain underutilized in resource-limited regions<sup>13</sup>. Mental health systems were tested in their capacity to respond to increasing demands. While some regions managed to expand services, most faced significant challenges, such as a shortage of trained professionals and inadequate funding<sup>14,15</sup>. This situation highlighted the urgent need for structural reforms to make systems more resilient to future crises.

## Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on the prevalence of mental disorders, significantly increasing rates of depression, anxiety and other psychological conditions. Factors such as social isolation, work overload and socioeconomic inequalities were crucial to this rise. The most vulnerable populations, including women, children, the elderly and low-income individuals, were disproportionately affected. Intervention strategies based on digital technologies proved to be useful tools but were insufficient to meet the total demand.

Therefore, expanding access to mental health services should be a priority, alongside public policies aimed at reducing structural inequalities. In the post-pandemic period, it is essential to continue monitoring mental health conditions and investing in the prevention and treatment of psychological disorders. Additionally, integrating mental health services into public healthcare systems and strengthening digital inclusion are urgent measures to mitigate future impacts.

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