

# COVID-19 may have consequences for mental health

June 18 2020

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The global COVID-19 pandemic has affected the physical lives of most people. But now there are also indications that the pandemic has negative consequences for the mental health of the people being infected, the healthcare professionals and the population as a whole.

This is shown in a new Danish review of 43 [scientific articles](#) that have studied the subject. The review was produced by researchers from the University of Copenhagen and the Mental Health Centre Copenhagen, Mental Health Services in the Capitol Region of Denmark.

"It is known from the previous SARS epidemic in 2002-2003, also called the bird flu, that [mental health](#) was affected among patients who survived the disease and among [healthcare professionals](#) treating the patients. Our recently published article systematically reviews current knowledge on symptoms among healthcare professionals and patients, and the same appears to be the case for the COVID-19 pandemic," says Professor Michael Eriksen Benros at the Department of Immunology and Microbiology at the University of Copenhagen and the Mental Health Centre Copenhagen.

## **Post-Traumatic Stress, Depression and Anxiety**

The article is a review of 43 scientific studies. Of these, 20 studies have examined the mental health among healthcare professionals. An analysis of the studies found higher levels of anxiety and depression as well as mental stress and poor quality of sleep. 19 studies examined the mental health of the population as a whole. Here, too, it is the overall picture that the COVID-19 pandemic seems to be having a negative impact.

Only two studies have so far examined mental symptoms among patients with SARS-CoV-2 infection. The studies showed that 96% of seriously ill hospitalized patients with COVID-19 infection exhibited symptoms of post-traumatic stress. They also found an increased risk of developing depression after hospitalization with COVID-19.

"Many more and better studies are needed, but the results are still relevant. The numerous reports of decreased sense of smell and taste during a COVID-19 infection might indicate an effect on the nervous

system. It is therefore worrying that mental symptoms have been detected during and immediately after the infection. One contributing factor might be that the infection has affected the brain and caused the symptoms, either directly or through the induced immune response," says Michael Eriksen Benros.

## **Need for Better and More Studies**

The researchers behind the review emphasize that significant reservations must be made because the included studies are of varying quality. The urgent societal and health crisis has led to faster than usual publication of scientific articles. In addition, most of the studies have been performed as online questionnaires and therefore do not have the same quality as thorough, clinical studies. Also, most studies are from Asia, and it is unclear whether the results can be transferred to a European context.

"We need more high-quality studies to make any final conclusions about a link between mental symptoms and COVID-19. However, our results indicate that COVID-19 may have an impact on the brain of those infected, and that there are derived effects of the pandemic on the mental health among both healthcare professionals and the population. Given that the previous SARS epidemic was also associated with mental symptoms, we believe that research in this area is extremely important, as knowledge is a prerequisite for dealing with any mental consequences of COVID-19," says Ph.D. student and first author, Nina Vindegaard Sørensen, from the Department of Immunology and Microbiology at the University of Copenhagen and the Mental Health Centre Copenhagen

The previous SARS epidemic spread to 28 countries and sickened around 8,000 people, while eight million people in over 180 countries and regions have already been infected with SARS-CoV-2.

**More information:** Nina Vindegaard et al, COVID-19 pandemic and mental health consequences: Systematic review of the current evidence, *Brain, Behavior, and Immunity* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.bbi.2020.05.048](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bbi.2020.05.048)

Provided by University of Copenhagen

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