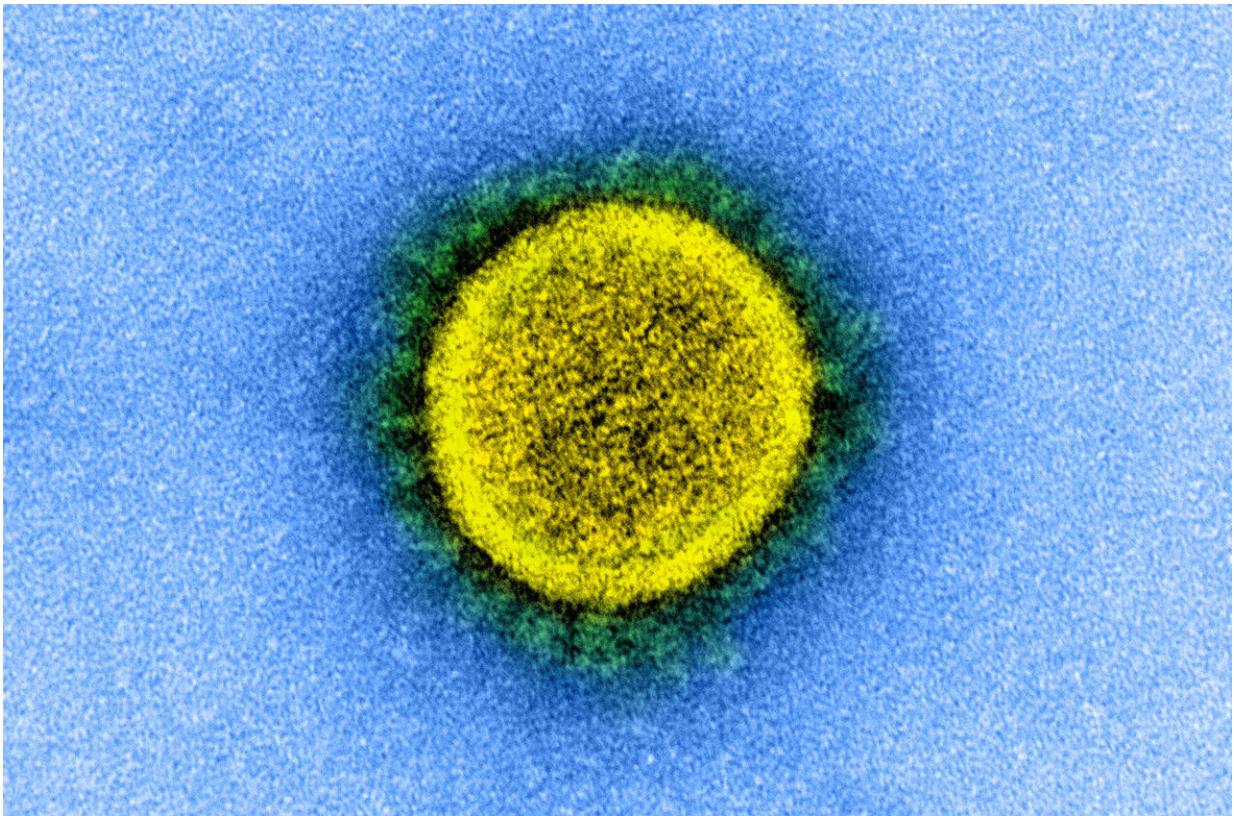![Medical Xpress]

Acute depression, stress, anxiety higher during peak of COVID-19 pandemic

July 28 2020

SARS-CoV-2 (shown here in an electron microscopy image). Credit: National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, NIH

Rates of elevated psychological distress, including depression and anxiety symptoms, were found among Australian adults during the peak

of the COVID-19 outbreak in Australia, according to a new study published July 28, 2020 in the open-access journal *PLOS ONE* by Jill Newby of the University of New South Wales at the Black Dog Institute, Sydney, Australia, and colleagues.

The acute and long-term mental health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are largely unknown. Research into previous pandemics has shown higher rates of illness fears, psychological distress, insomnia and other mental health problems in people with pre-existing mental illness, front-line health care workers, and survivors of the disease. Research into the mental health impacts of COVID-19 is needed to inform policy decisions, prevention efforts, treatment programs, and community support systems.

In the new study, researchers used an online survey, administered March 27 through April 7—now considered to be the peak of the COVID-19 outbreak in Australia—to examine mental health responses to the pandemic among 5070 Australian adults. The online questionnaire asked participants about their fears, behavioral responses to COVID-19, psychological distress, alcohol use, and physical activity. A similar survey had already been carried out among 2,174 Australians in early March, when cases in the country were still low.

The population included in the survey was not representative of the overall population; 70% had pre-existing mental health diagnoses, 86% were female, and 75% were Caucasian. Although few participants had contracted COVID-19 (0.15%), more than one-quarter (25.9%) were very or extremely worried about contracting the virus and more than half (52.7%) were very or extremely worried about their family and friends. While the questionnaires could not be used to make any diagnoses, most participants reported that their mental health had worsened during the outbreak, with 55% saying it had worsened a little and 23% saying it had worsened a lot. Around half of all participants reported moderate to

extreme loneliness and worry about their financial situation. Between 20.3 and 24.1% of people surveyed had been experiencing severe or extremely severe levels of depression, anxiety and stress over the week preceding their survey, and another 18 to 22% had moderate symptoms.

Newby says: "We wanted to provide a snapshot of the mental health of the general community during the COVID-19 outbreak and look into the impact of the enforcement of social distancing laws, in Australia." She adds, "We don't know what the long-term impacts of the pandemic will be, but these figures certainly show a negative impact on mental health in the short-term."

More information: Newby JM, O'Moore K, Tang S, Christensen H, Faasse K (2020) Acute mental health responses during the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia. *PLoS ONE* 15(7): e0236562. doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0236562