

Pandemic stress, exhaustion weigh on health care workers

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(HealthDay)—The pandemic is taking a toll on health care workers'

sleep, which can put both their mental health and patient care at risk, researchers warn.

Their study of more than 800 New York City health care workers found that compared to those with no sleep problems, those with [poor sleep](#) were two times more likely to report symptoms of depression, 70% more likely to report anxiety, and 50% more likely to report mental distress.

"Right now, a large percentage of health care workers are leaving their jobs because of the stress, producing a shortage of health care workers nationally," said study author Dr. Marwah Abdalla, an assistant professor of medicine at Columbia University's Vagelos College of Physicians and Surgeons.

"With fewer workers on the job, the remaining staff must work more and longer shifts, exacerbating their [sleep problems](#) and stress," she said in a university news release.

During the pandemic's first peak in New York City (April-May 2020), Abdalla and her colleagues conducted a series of surveys of health care workers' sleep habits and psychological symptoms.

In a study published in August, the team said more than 70% of the health care workers had at least moderate insomnia symptoms during the first peak of the pandemic.

That percentage has since declined, but nearly 40% of the health care workers still had insomnia symptoms 10 weeks later when the first wave was over and work schedules had returned to more normal levels, according to the researchers.

The study also showed that health care workers with poor sleep had higher levels of stress, anxiety and depression than those with better

sleep.

The findings were published recently in the *Journal of Affective Disorders*.

Along with affecting health care workers' [mental health](#), poor sleep also "degrades quality of care for our patients and can increase medical errors," Abdalla noted.

While improved sleep won't ease all the extra stress faced by [health care workers](#) due to the pandemic, it may help improve their mental and physical health, she suggested.

"Previous research has shown that sleep trouble increases your risk for [chronic conditions](#) such as [heart disease](#), diabetes, dementia and cancer," Abdalla said. "If you have trouble sleeping, let this be a wake-up call."

More information: Franchesca Diaz et al, The association between sleep and psychological distress among New York City healthcare workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, *Journal of Affective Disorders* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jad.2021.10.033](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2021.10.033)

The U.S. National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute offers a [guide to healthy sleep](#).

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