

Chronically ill parents experienced high levels of mental distress during COVID

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A new Deakin study has shown parents with a chronic health condition reported worse mental health outcomes during the pandemic than healthy parents.

Undoubtably Australian [parents](#) have encountered significant challenges

during COVID-19. From lockdowns to home-schooling and working from home, parenting became even more of a juggle.

In a prospective cohort study, Professor Antonina Mikocka-Walus from Deakin University's Centre for Social and Early Emotional Development (SEED) found about 24% of parents with a chronic disease reported moderate to severe levels of distress during COVID-19 as compared to 17% of healthy parents.

The study is the first-of-its-kind to examine the connection between [chronic illness](#) and [mental health](#) during the COVID-19 pandemic in parents.

Prof. Mikocka-Walus said the findings, published in the *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, were concerning because many parents experienced disruption to their daily routines, ability to access healthcare providers and [support systems](#) under lockdown measures.

"The research tells us that those parents who reported high levels of distress were more likely to have a chronic illness, as well as being younger and with low levels of social support."

During lockdowns, many parents found the support they rely on—including relatives, paid household services, schools, day care centres and after-school sports—were not available.

"The pandemic has been particularly hard on parents, with pressures of working from home and home-schooling in tandem. Our study shows that for parents with a chronic illness it's been even tougher," Prof. Mikocka-Walus said.

"We found parents with chronic illness, compared to those without, were overrepresented in experiencing high levels of overall distress."

In gathering data for the study, Prof. Mikocka-Walus and her colleagues took advantage of the rare opportunity provided by the COVID-19 Pandemic Adjustment Survey, offering insights from over 1600 parents between April 2020 to March 2021.

At the beginning of the pandemic, it became increasingly clear that people with some chronic health conditions were more at risk of COVID-19. There is recent evidence linking self-perceived COVID-19 health risks to increased levels of worry, limited social interactions and increased isolation as well as poorer [mental health outcomes](#).

"For people with chronic illness, personal contexts can impact the process of self-management and have highly important implications for their health," Prof. Mikocka-Walus said.

Low levels of social support are consistently associated with increased mental health concerns, so as COVID-19 continues to affect large numbers of people, Prof. Mikocka-Walus said it's important to pay attention to the amount of social support received from family members and friends.

"We should be developing interventions to support all parents during future pandemic-like events to support their mental wellbeing.

"Hopefully, this will include separate support systems for parents with chronic illness with a focus on providing social [support](#)."

More information: Kinga Bik-Multanowska et al, Mental distress of parents with chronic diseases during the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia: A prospective cohort study, *Journal of Psychosomatic Research* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jpsychores.2021.110688](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpsychores.2021.110688)

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