

# COVID-19 has left GPs struggling around the world, new study shows

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The pandemic left many GPs around the world feeling depressed, anxious and in some cases burned out, a review of global studies has revealed.

The review, published in the *British Journal of General Practice* and led by the University of York, also found that women doctors in primary care reported more [psychological problems](#), whilst those who are older reported greater stress and burnout.

Researchers reviewed research literature and identified 31 studies evaluating the impact of COVID-19 on the [mental health](#) and wellbeing of doctors in primary care.

Healthcare systems vary across countries and this review identified only three studies of GPs working in the UK. Studies used a wide variety of measures to assess psychological wellbeing and lacked measurements from before the [pandemic](#), which makes comparisons difficult.

There were, though, common themes highlighting the difficulties faced by doctors working in primary care settings (similar to NHS GPs) around the world.

Sources of stress during the pandemic included changed working practices, exposure to COVID-19 and inadequate PPE, information overload, lack of preparedness for the pandemic and poor communication across health sectors.

The studies demonstrated an impact on primary care doctors' psychological wellbeing, with some also experiencing a fear of COVID-19 and lower job satisfaction. A third of the studies also explored [physical symptoms](#)—with GPs reporting migraines and headaches, tiredness and exhaustion, sleep disorders and increased eating, drinking and smoking.

One UK study which focused on GPs with symptoms of long COVID found GPs felt 'let down' and expressed frustration at the lack of support and recognition for the condition.

Study author, Dr. Laura Jefferson from the Department of Health Sciences said: "Many GPs have reported stress and burnout over recent years, which is potentially damaging not just to doctors themselves, but also to patients and healthcare systems.

"The COVID-19 pandemic has presented additional challenges for GPs, including rapid change, risks of infection, remote working, pent-up demand and reductions in face-to-face patient care.

"While there has been a tendency for research like this to focus on hospital roles, there was a need to synthesize evidence and explore factors associated with GPs' mental health and wellbeing during the pandemic.

"This is the first systematic review exploring the psychological wellbeing of [primary care](#) doctors during the COVID-19 pandemic."

Seven studies reported statistically significant differences in outcomes for women GPs, including higher stress levels, greater reporting of burden, burnout and anxiety. Older age was associated with higher stress levels in three studies.

The research concluded that policy and infrastructure are needed to support GPs and further research is needed to explore gender and age differences; identifying interventions targeted to these groups.

This report was funded by the Department of Health and Social Care NIHR Policy Research Program, exploring the impact of COVID-19 on GPs' wellbeing.

The paper called, "General practitioner [wellbeing](#) during the COVID-19 pandemic. A systematic review," is published in the *British Journal of General Practice*.

**More information:** Laura Jefferson et al, General practitioner wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic. A systematic review, *British Journal of General Practice* (2022). [DOI: 10.3399/BJGP.2021.0680](https://doi.org/10.3399/BJGP.2021.0680)

Provided by University of York

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