

New study finds association between COVID-19 testing uptake and mental disorders

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New research from one University of Alabama at Birmingham School of Education researcher claims that, without sufficient COVID-19 testing

capacity, it is possible that people can experience increased mental distress due to fear and concerns over their COVID-19 status.

According to study lead author Yusen Zhai, Ph.D., assistant professor in the Department of Human Studies and director of the UAB Community Counseling Clinic, COVID-19 testing is an effective yet underutilized way to manage the transmission of COVID-19.

"In March 2022, the Biden administration launched a nationwide Test to Treat Initiative, which aimed to allow Americans to rapidly access needed COVID-19 treatments," Zhai said. "In principle, the sooner people can get COVID-19 tests when they suspect having exposure or infection, the sooner they can seek COVID-19 treatments—like oral antiviral pills—if tested positive."

Zhai adds that, despite the federal government's efforts to expand the COVID-19 testing capacity, Americans still experience difficulties accessing COVID-19 tests throughout the pandemic.

"Free at-home COVID-19 home-testing kits (delivered by the federal government) run out quickly and never meet the ongoing need for testing among millions of Americans," Zhai said. "The federal free COVID-19 test program has been suspended due to a lack of funding. In other words, the U.S. [federal government](#) has no longer sustained COVID-19 testing capacity without sufficient funding from Congress."

Fear and uncertainty fueled by COVID-19 among the public and [health care workers](#) have worsened [mental health outcomes](#), overwhelming and exhausting the health care system, according to Zhai.

"People who suspect having COVID-19 exposure or infection may have excessive worries and fear of COVID-19 infections, which leads to [mental distress](#) such as depression, anxiety and suicide," he said.

"Therefore, it is critical to empirically assess the role of the use of COVID-19 tests in mental health among Americans."

The study, published in *BJPsych Open*, examined the associations between COVID-19 testing uptake (i.e., the use of COVID-19 tests) and certain mental disorders.

"Overall, we found that adults who accessed COVID-19 tests—even tested positive—were at significantly lower risk than those with unconfirmed (without testing) COVID-19 for [severe depression](#), severe anxiety, eating disorders and suicidal ideation," Zhai said. "The findings suggest that individuals who suspected they had COVID-19 but lacked confirmatory testing were more susceptible to exacerbated [mental health](#) problems, likely due to worries and fear of infection."

More information: Yusen Zhai et al, Association between COVID-19 testing uptake and mental disorders among adults in US post-secondary education, 2020–2021, *BJPsych Open* (2022). [DOI: 10.1192/bjo.2022.580](#)

Provided by University of Alabama at Birmingham

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