

Study finds high rates of burnout across health care professions

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Burnout is associated with adverse outcomes including medical errors and lower quality of care. While many studies have focused on physician or nurse burnout, the COVID-19 pandemic increased stress across the

health care workforce, including support staff and health care teams who have a crucial role in patient care.

A new study of 206 health care organizations led by investigators from Brigham and Women's Hospital, a founding member of the Mass General Brigham health care system, identified high levels of [burnout](#), intent to leave the profession, and work overload across all members of the health care workforce. Their results are published in the *Journal of General Internal Medicine*.

"Teams are crucial for good health care delivery and our study emphasizes a need to improve the well-being of the many role types that comprise our health care teams," said corresponding author Lisa S. Rotenstein, MD, MBA, a primary care physician at the Brigham and Assistant Professor of Medicine at Harvard Medical School. "We need to support all roles within the health care environment in order to provide high-quality [patient care](#)."

Rotenstein's team analyzed burnout, intent to leave the profession, and feelings of work overload reported in the American Medical Association's Coping with COVID Survey from April to December 2020. Through the survey, 43,026 responses were collected from 206 health care organizations.

Respondents included over 15,000 physicians and 11,000 nurses. They also included over 5,000 other [clinical staff](#) such as pharmacists, nursing assistants, therapists, medical assistants, or [social workers](#) and over 11,000 non-clinical staff including housekeeping, administrative staff, lab technicians, or food service staff.

"Individuals in other clinical roles or non-clinical roles such as technicians, food service workers or nursing assistants may be more likely to be from underrepresented minority groups or hold multiple

jobs," Rotenstein said. "They may be less likely to be in a position to speak up about their own working conditions."

Approximately 50 percent of all respondents reported burnout, with the highest levels among nurses (56 percent) and other clinical staff (54.1 percent) reporting burnout. Intent to leave the job was reported by 28.7 percent of health care workers, with 41 percent of nurses, 32.6 percent of non-clinical staff and 31.1 percent of clinical staff reporting the sentiment. The intent to leave was higher for both physicians and nurses in an in-patient setting compared to out-patient settings.

The prevalence of perceived work overload ranged from 37.1 percent among physicians to 47.4 percent in other clinical staff. And this work overload was significantly associated with both burnout and intent to leave the job.

"That is something potentially actionable. There isn't a standard way to quantify work overload in the health care setting," said Rotenstein. "There's an opportunity here to both identify and address workload across all role types."

Rotenstein advocates for more innovative approaches that do not simply shift responsibilities from some members of the health care workforce to others, but to automate or reimagine some of these responsibilities.

Survey completion was voluntary, so the population is not necessarily representative of the health care workforce. Additionally, the data were collected at the height of the pandemic, and levels of burnout could have changed. Still, the [survey](#) responses underscore the importance of looking at the experience of all health care workers.

"We are acutely seeing the effects of burnout across the workforce," Rotenstein said. "There are staffing shortages in health care facilities

across the country and it's not just physicians. It is nurses, medical assistants, and more. We need to take care of all types of health care workers."

More information: Lisa S. Rotenstein et al, The Association of Work Overload with Burnout and Intent to Leave the Job Across the Healthcare Workforce During COVID-19, *Journal of General Internal Medicine* (2023). [DOI: 10.1007/s11606-023-08153-z](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11606-023-08153-z)

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