

Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on incidence of long-term conditions in Wales

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A population data linkage study using anonymized primary and secondary care health records in Swansea University's SAIL Databank has revealed that in 2020 and 2021, fewer people in Wales were being

diagnosed with long-term conditions than expected.

Diagnosis rates increased over the two-year period but for most conditions, they still lagged behind expectations at the end of 2021, implicating a potential backlog of undiagnosed patients who are unlikely to be receiving systematic monitoring and management for their conditions.

The study was led by researchers from Population Data Science at Swansea University Medical School in partnership with the Wales COVID-19 Evidence Centre, Welsh Government, Cardiff University and PRIME Centre Wales.

Among the most affected conditions were [chronic obstructive pulmonary disease](#) (COPD) and [anxiety disorders](#) corresponding to more than 30 and 80 "missing" diagnoses in a typical general practice of 10,000 patients, respectively.

Such a practice may have more than 400 missing diagnoses across the 17 conditions studied. Researchers did not find any notable differences in socio-demographic characteristics of the patients diagnosed pre- and post- pandemic such as age, sex and ethnicity.

A second phase of research will build on this work to investigate the impact of COVID on patterns of healthcare resource use for patients with long-term conditions.

The study team conducted a population data linkage study using primary and secondary care data within the Secure Anonymized Information Linkage (SAIL) Databank. They identified 2,257,992 individuals living in Wales and diagnosed for the first time with any of 17 long-term conditions between Jan 1, 2000, and Dec 31, 2021.

Comparing diagnosis rates of each condition from 2020 to 2021 to forecasted expectations based on rates from 2015 to 2019, the researchers estimated the difference between the total number of expected and recorded diagnoses over the two-year period.

This research uncovers a potential backlog of undiagnosed patients with multiple long-term conditions in Wales, requiring resources to tackle anticipated workload as part of COVID-19 recovery, particularly in primary care.

"This study gives us valuable insight into the wider effects the pandemic has had on people, communities and the NHS in Wales," said Professor Kieran Walshe, Director of Health and Care Research Wales and Professor of Health Policy and Management.

"Research partnerships like this demonstrate not only the huge value of collaboration in research, but also the range of benefits offered by making full use of routinely collected data. From April this year, the newly expanded Wales Evidence Centre will deliver on a wider remit, addressing key priority issues in health, public health and social care."

Co-director of SAIL Databank Professor Ronan Lyons added, "SAIL Databank has been an integral tool for monitoring transmission and the long-term effects of the pandemic since it first emerged. Over the last 15 years, the teams at SAIL and Population Data Science, together with others across [public health](#) bodies in Wales, have worked hard to develop our network and capabilities which has enabled us to respond swiftly and effectively to this health crisis.

"As part of this One Wales collaboration, our work is far from over as we continue to monitor and assess COVID-19's impact across Wales and ensure that we learn from this experience and further enhance our collective resolve and knowledge for future [health](#) emergencies."

The work is published in the *British Journal of General Practice*.

More information: Cathy Qi et al, Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on incidence of long-term conditions in Wales: a population data linkage study using primary and secondary care health records, *British Journal of General Practice* (2023). [DOI: 10.3399/BJGP.2022.0353](https://doi.org/10.3399/BJGP.2022.0353)

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