

Nurses, health care staff face higher suicide risks

September 26 2023, by Sarah D. Collins



Nurses, health technicians and health care support workers face a higher

risk of suicide than the general U.S. population does, an alarming new study shows.

Researchers pointed out these workers have to perform stressful tasks while caring for ill patients and managing heavy workloads, with little control over patient outcomes.

Not only that, but "[health care workers](#)' relationship roles are often characterized as having a kind of a high achievement and a perfectionistic or compulsive personality traits that can make them excessively devoted to their work and have trouble taking time off," said study first author Dr. Mark Olfson, a professor in Columbia University's Department of Psychiatry. "And all of this can contribute to poor self-care and delay them recognizing a need for help. There's also a lot of stigma that continues just around [mental health care](#)."

The study, published Sept. 26 in the [Journal of the American Medical Association](#), looked at a nationally representative group of more than 1.8 million adults ages 26 and older in data that spanned from 2008 through 2019.

Health care workers were divided into six groups—physicians, registered nurses, other health care-diagnosing or treating practitioners, health technicians, health care support workers, and social/behavioral health workers—and compared them with non-health care workers.

Analysis of the data showed that health care support workers, registered nurses and health technicians were more likely than non-health care workers to die by suicide. Meanwhile, doctor suicide rates were roughly the same as those in the [general population](#), at annual standardized suicide rates of 13 for every 100,000 people. The report also found that health care work is more strongly associated with suicide risk among female workers.

In previous research, Olsson also found that registered nurses, [social workers](#) and other behavioral health workers are at significantly greater risk for drug overdose death compared to non-health care workers.

Past studies have examined [mental health](#) among physicians, but this new study noted that little was known about the mental health of the approximately 95% of remaining workers in the [health care industry](#).

The study also doesn't include data from the pandemic, which triggered elevated levels of stress and burnout among health care workers.

Mayer Bellehse, founding director of the Center for Traumatic Stress, Resilience and Recovery and the Feinberg Division of the Unified Behavioral Health Center for Military Veterans and their Families, both at Northwell Health in New York, said changing the health care system to better support workers would be a tall task.

"There are numerous levels of change that need to be occurring, from directly addressing access and stigma around mental health to creating environments that are sufficiently resourced and supportive, with lower emphasis on productivity demands," said Bellehse, who was not involved with the study.

In addition, "more emphasis on empowering health care workers to be able to deliver the [clinical care](#) that they want, in a way that they feel is also respecting their ability for autonomy" would help, he said.

As for what loved ones of health care workers can do, Bellehse said it's important to "pay attention to changes in loved ones' emotions, behaviors and mood, and do not take it lightly if you suspect that someone is having a change in their mental [health](#)."

"Make sure to reach out and ask questions around how a person is doing,

including being comfortable with directly asking if somebody is having thoughts of suicide," he added. "If so, link them into resources that can help."

For people who feel their lives are at risk, the [988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline](#) number is available to call or text 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

More information: Mark Olfson et al, Suicide Risks of Health Care Workers in the US, *JAMA* (2023). [DOI: 10.1001/jama.2023.15787](https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2023.15787)

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