



Mental health strain due to COVID-19: Psychological distress and somatic symptoms among health care workers and the general population in Kashmir, India

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ABSTRACT

Background/Objectives: The COVID-19 pandemic precipitated a global rise in psychological morbidities, markedly increasing depression, anxiety, and stress. This study provides an early regional perspective on the burden of the post-pandemic mental health burden. Building on our prior findings of substantial psychological distress in this region, we examined associations between specific COVID-19 symptoms, symptom clusters, hospitalization status, and the severity of depression, anxiety, and stress. Correlates of psychological distress were also identified. While this study uses the same cohort as our primary study, it addresses a distinct research question not previously examined, and all novel findings (symptom-clusters associations, odds ratios from multivariable regression) are presented here for the first time.

Methods: Symptomatic distress was assessed using a self-designed, validated DASS-21 questionnaire among 253 participants.

Results: Overall prevalence rates were 54.5% for depression, 68.0% for anxiety, and 54.4% for stress. Among healthcare professionals ($n = 161$; 64.1%), extremely severe anxiety (21.1%), moderate depression (23.9%), and mild-to-severe stress (11.8%) predominated. In the non-healthcare group ($n = 99$; 39.6%), moderate depression (33.7%), moderate anxiety (23.0%), and moderate stress (16.9%) were most frequent. Significant associations were observed between psychological distress and symptoms including fever ($OR = 1.2$; 95% CI: 1.0–1.4), breathlessness ($OR = 2.2$; 95% CI: 1.5–3.0), and decreased level of consciousness ($OR = 11.4$; 95% CI: 1.1–109.2). Symptom clusters (e.g., fatigue) was also significantly associated with higher distress levels ($p < 0.05$).

Conclusion: A high prevalence of depression, anxiety, and stress was observed, particularly among individuals with symptomatic and prolonged COVID-19 illness. Symptom severity and extended disease duration was significantly associated to psychological distress, underscoring the need for targeted mental health interventions in post-pandemic settings.

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