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Title

Effects of COVID-19 pandemic on anxiety and depression in primary care: A cohort study in Ontario, Canada

Priority 1 (Research Category)

Behavioral, psychosocial, and mental illness

Presenters

Ellen Stephenson, PhD, Karen Tu, MD, MSc, CCFP, FCFP, Catherine Ji, MD, MSc, Debra Butt, MD, MSc, Noah Crampton, MD, Jessica Gronsbell, PhD, Sumeet Kalia, MSc, Braden O'Neill, MD, PhD

Abstract

Context: Many people have experienced poorer mental health and increased distress during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is unclear to what extent this has resulted in increases in the number of patients presenting with anxiety and/or depression in primary care. Objective: To determine if there are more patients are visiting their family doctor for anxiety/depression during the COVID-19 pandemic compared to before the pandemic, and to determine whether these effects varied based on patient demographic characteristics. Study Design: A retrospective cohort study of family medicine patients from 2017-2020. Data source: Electronic medical records (EMRs) from the University of Toronto Practice Based-Research Network (UTOPIAN) Data Safe Haven. The majority of physicians in the UTOPIAN EMR database practice in the Greater Toronto Area, a high-COVID region of Canada. Population studied: Active family practice patients aged 10 and older with at least 1 year of EMR data. Outcome measures: Visits for anxiety and/or depression; prescriptions for antidepressant medications. Results: Changes in visits for anxiety and depression during the COVID-19 pandemic were consistent with an increased demand for mental healthcare and an increase in the number of individuals with anxiety and depression. Increases in visits for anxiety and depression were larger for younger patients, women, and later in the pandemic. Among younger patients, prescriptions for antidepressants were substantially reduced during the first few months of the pandemic (April-May 2020) but incidences rates increased later in 2020. Increases in visit volume during the pandemic were consistent with more frequent visits for anxiety/depression and more new patients presenting with anxiety or depression. Conclusion: The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in an increased demand for mental health services from family physicians. Increases in anxiety and depression were especially pronounced among younger female patients and increased throughout the pandemic. Our findings highlight the need for continued efforts to support and address mental health concerns in primary care.