

# Health care policies are needed to support health care professionals' mental health, says study

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Improvements in the lifestyle of health care professionals can help protect their mental health. In particular improved lifestyle may reduce

the risk of depression and anxiety by up to 40% during pandemics, according to a new study published in *General Psychiatry* by researchers at Queen Mary University of London and medical staff at various hospitals across the UK.

The CoPE-HCP study was designed during the early part of COVID-19 pandemic, when there was great concern for the mental health of health care professionals with no scientifically-proven mitigating strategies to reduce that impact. This new longitudinal study has found that on average, the lifestyle of health care professionals had generally worsened by four months after the start of the pandemic.

About 43% of the 613 health care professionals involved had initially reported being less physically active, which rose to 56% four months later. It was also concerning that 23% of health care professionals in this study reported not always managing to eat a [healthy diet](#), which rose to 28% four months later.

The study, which involved two online surveys approximately four months apart, also found that the risk of depression, anxiety, and low mental well-being was reduced by up to 40% when their lifestyle improved compared to the start of the pandemic. Interestingly, those whose lifestyle had improved also had improved depression and anxiety symptoms and increased mental well-being over time, demonstrating the value of a [healthy lifestyle](#) to maintain good mental health.

Dr. Ajay Gupta, senior author, chief investigator and Clinical Reader at Queen Mary and Honorary Consultant in Clinical Pharmacology and Cardiovascular Medicine, said, "This important study demonstrates the consistent association between maintaining a healthy lifestyle and a reduced risk of mental health issues in health care professionals."

"This is extremely important because healthy lifestyle, such as increased

[physical activity](#), maintaining a healthy diet, and reduced alcohol, cigarette smoking, and vaping consumption, is a cost-effective strategy which can be implemented by the individual, but also promoted by the NHS Trusts and other providers, to help protect their staff against the adverse mental health impact. I would encourage all NHS trusts to provide provision for exercise and stress relief strategies routinely to staff, but in particular to those at higher risk. One such example could be subsidized gym or swimming access to HCPs."

This study was the first to demonstrate that improved overall [lifestyle](#) can help improve symptoms of depression and anxiety over time, or protect against worsened symptoms of depression and anxiety, in health care professionals working during the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings should help [policy makers](#) to review provisions of these measures in the work-place to improve work conditions and retention of the staff, and more importantly their mental well-being.

**More information:** Mohammed Y Khanji et al, Improved lifestyle is associated with improved depression, anxiety and well-being over time in UK healthcare professionals during the COVID-19 pandemic: insights from the CoPE-HCP cohort study, *General Psychiatry* (2023). [DOI: 10.1136/gpsych-2022-100908](#)

Provided by Queen Mary, University of London

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