

# Stressed, exhausted: Frontline workers faced big mental strain in pandemic

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(HealthDay)—Doctors, nurses and other frontline health workers in U.S. emergency departments have struggled with significant mental health challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, a new poll reveals.

"As the nation moves into what many believe is a fourth wave of COVID, this study is important to our understanding of the impact of the pandemic on the mental well-being of frontline medical personnel," said lead author Dr. Robert Rodriguez, a professor of emergency medicine at the University of California, San Francisco.

His team surveyed about 1,600 physicians, nurses, advanced practice providers, [social workers](#) and other personnel at 20 U.S. emergency departments between May and July of 2020.

Survey respondents reported [high stress levels](#), emotional exhaustion, insomnia and nightmares. The results also revealed that nearly one-fifth were at increased risk for post-traumatic stress disorder

(PTSD).

Their greatest concerns included exposing loved ones or others to the virus, the well-being of co-workers diagnosed with COVID-19, and patients with an unclear diagnosis who might expose others in the community.

The study found that regular COVID-19 testing helped reduce stress levels, particularly among those who had previously tested positive for coronavirus antibodies.

The survey participants were from emergency department staffs in 16 cities in Alabama, California, Colorado, Florida, Iowa, Louisiana, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, New York, Pennsylvania and Texas.

The findings were published April 9 in the journal *Annals of Emergency Medicine*.

"We found that feelings of work-related anxiety, emotional exhaustion and burnout were prevalent across the full spectrum of emergency department staff," Rodriguez said in a university news release.

That's why recognizing signs of stress, burnout and anxiety early on is critical, he explained.

"Emergency department personnel serve as the initial hospital caregivers for the majority of critically ill patients with known or suspected COVID-19 infection," Rodriguez said. "Protecting and maintaining the health of the emergency department workforce is imperative in the ongoing battle against COVID-19."

Rodriguez suggested that employers encourage workers to take time off, get adequate rest and use available well-being resources. That's especially important "considering the relatively high levels of burnout symptoms, and that more than half of participants reported experiencing at least one

symptom of PTSD and as many as 20% were at higher risk," he noted.

In [contrast](#) to previous research by the same team, the new study found that [personal protective equipment](#) was no longer among the top five concerns for emergency department staff, suggesting that it has become more widely available.

**More information:** Mental Health America has more on [health care workers and the COVID-19 pandemic](#).

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