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Dentists and Dental Hygienists on Early Front Lines of COVID-19 Report Symptoms of Anxiety, Depression

First known U.S. study to examine mental health of dental professionals during pandemic, association between COVID-19 vaccine and mental health

CHICAGO, July 25, 2022 –The first known U.S. study to evaluate the mental health of frontline dentists and dental hygienists during the pandemic found that dental health care workers report anxiety and depression symptoms during peaks of transmission among the public.

Published jointly in the August issues of *The Journal of the American Dental Association* and the *Journal of Dental Hygiene* and available online at JADA.ada.org, the study indicates between June 2020 and June 2021, 17.7% of dental health care workers reported anxiety symptoms, 10.7% reported depression symptoms, and 8.3% reported symptoms of both. The one-year study conducted from June 2020 to June 2021, included 8,902 dental health care workers participating monthly in an anonymous longitudinal, web-based survey.

According to the findings, between June 2020 and June 2021, dental hygienists reported higher rates of depression symptoms than dentists at each surveyed time point, with depression symptom rates peaking in December 2020. Dental hygienists' depression rates declined in 2021 as dentists' rates of depression symptoms remained steady. At the end of the study period, both groups had relatively similar rates — 11.8% for dentists and 12.4% for hygienists.

“Interestingly, dental health care workers reported lower rates of anxiety and depression symptoms than the general public, despite being on the front lines and providing oral health care during the pandemic,” says author Stacey Dershewitz, J.D., Psy.D., Adjunct Professor of Clinical Psychology and Director of the Center Clinic at the George Washington University Professional Psychology Program. “As the pandemic continues, it is critically important that dental health care workers continue to develop their ability to recognize and address signs and symptoms of mental health conditions within themselves and their colleagues, promote healthy work environments, reduce the impact of stress on the profession, and make supports accessible to those who are struggling emotionally.”

Some participants' anxiety symptoms decreased after receiving the COVID-19 vaccine. The study — also the first to examine the association between the COVID-19 vaccine and mental health — found that unvaccinated dental health care workers who intended to be vaccinated suffered significantly more anxiety symptoms (20.6%) compared to fully-vaccinated dental health care workers (14.1%).

“The hope is that this is just the first of many steps in monitoring mental wellness of the entire oral care team,” says JoAnn Gurenlian, R.D.H., M.S., Ph.D., A.F.A.A.O.M., Director of Education and Research, American Dental Hygienists' Association. “There is much work to be done to dismantle barriers to treatment and prioritize wellbeing in the oral care setting, as well as look at future research around contributing factors to mental illness that may be unique to these professions.”

The study is part of ongoing collaborative research efforts between the American Dental Association (ADA) and the American Dental Hygienists' Associations (ADHA) to understand COVID-19's impact on dental health care workers.

“As members of the dental profession, we are committed to improving the oral health of our patients and communities. Furthermore, as healthcare professionals, we must be committed to our own health and wellness to optimally care for others,” says study author Maria L. Geisinger, D.D.S, M.S., Professor and Director of the Advanced Education Program in Periodontology at the University of Alabama at Birmingham School of Dentistry. “Creating professional environments that allow for open communication about mental health among members of the dental team can reduce the stigma around mental health diagnoses and treatment for dental health care workers.”

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About the American Dental Association

The not-for-profit ADA is the nation's largest dental association, representing 161,000 dentist members. The premier source of oral health information, the ADA has advocated for the public's health and promoted the art and science of dentistry since 1859. The ADA's state-of-the-art research facilities develop and test dental products and materials that have advanced the practice of dentistry and made the patient experience more positive. The [ADA Seal of Acceptance](#) long has been a valuable and respected guide to consumer dental care products. [The Journal of the American Dental Association](#) (JADA), published monthly, is the ADA's flagship publication and the best-read scientific journal in dentistry. For more information about the ADA, visit [ADA.org](#). For more information on oral health, including prevention, care and treatment of dental disease, visit the ADA's consumer website [MouthHealthy.org](#).

About the American Dental Hygienists' Association

The American Dental Hygienists' Association (ADHA) is the largest national organization representing the professional interests of the country's more than 226,000 dental hygienists. Dental hygienists are preventive oral health professionals, licensed in dental hygiene, who provide educational, clinical and therapeutic services that support total health through the promotion of optimal oral health. The [Journal of Dental Hygiene](#) is the premier, peer-reviewed scientific research publication for dental hygienists and can be found at [jdh.adha.org](#). To learn more about ADHA, the profession of dental hygiene or the link between oral health and general health, visit [adha.org](#).