New research finds COVID-19 increases risk of MH disorders

COVID-19 patients face greater mental health risks, such as anxiety, depression and suicide ideation, as well as increased opioid use, compared to people who were not infected with the virus, according to researchers who set out to estimate the risks of incident mental health disorders in survivors of the acute phase of COVID-19. These mental health conditions arose within a year after patients recovered from the virus — whether they had a serious case of it or a mild infection.

The study, “Risks of mental health outcomes in people with covid-19: cohort study,” published Feb. 16 in The BMJ, is considered the largest cohort study to date to examine survivors of COVID-19 and their mental health risks, the researchers stated.

The senior researcher of the study talked about the increasing stress many have faced and continue to face during the pandemic, now in its third year. “All of us have experienced some measure of stress with all the changes — schools, lockdown policies, lots of things, like not being able to see friends and family,” Ziyad Al-Aly, M.D., chief of research and development at the VA St. Louis Health Care System, told MHW.

Added Al-Aly: “But what happens to people who have had COVID-19? Do they have [mental health issues] worse?”

Methodology

The researchers analyzed de-identified medical records in a database maintained by the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs. The study was conducted using data from the Veterans Health Administration, which operates the largest nationally integrated health care system in the United States.

Researchers created a controlled database that included health information of 153,848 adults who had tested positive for COVID-19 sometime from March 1, 2020, through Jan. 15, 2021, and who had survived the first 30 days of the disease. The cohort was also composed of two control groups: 5.6 million people with no evidence of SARS-CoV-2 infection and a historical control group of 5.8 million people that predated the COVID-19 pandemic. Study participants had been followed for one year, said Al-Aly.

Few people in the study were vaccinated prior to development of the COVID-19 vaccine, as the vaccines were not yet widely available at the time of enrollment, the researchers noted.

The majority of study participants were older white men. Due to its large size, however, the study included more than 1.3 million women, more than 2.1 million Black participants and large numbers of people of various ages.

Results

People who survived the first 30 days of COVID-19 showed an increased risk of incident anxiety disorders, depressive disorders, and stress and adjustment disorders. This was coupled with an increased use of antidepressants and benzodiazepines, the study stated.

Compared with those in the control groups with any infections, people who contracted COVID-19 were 35% more likely to suffer from anxiety disorders and nearly 40% more likely to experience depression or stress-related disorders that can affect behavior and emotions. This finding coincided with a 55% increase in the use of antidepressants and 65% growth in the use of benzodiazepines to treat anxiety.

“This study is telling us that while all people endured some kind of problem during the pandemic, COVID-19 [patients] had it worse,” said Al-Aly. COVID-19 survivors also experienced post-traumatic stress disorder and sleep disorders, he said.

Individuals infected with the virus also were 34% more likely to develop opioid use disorders and 20% more likely to develop nonopioid substance use disorders involving alcohol or drugs. They were also 46% more likely to have suicidal thoughts.

A “major reveal,” noted Al-Aly, is that it didn’t matter whether COVID-19 was severe in a patient or not. They didn’t have to be hospitalized to develop a mental health disorder. “Even some people who were mild or asymptomatic went on to develop some mental health problems,” he said.

Clinical implications

Al-Aly said health care providers should be aware that many people will experience some problems; however, COVID-19 survivors have the highest risk of problems. “People should know they are not alone,” he said. Millions of people are experiencing these issues, said Al-Aly. Awareness and education are important. “Ask your patients about problems with sleep, mood, sadness or suicidal thinking,” he said.

He added, “Identifying problems early is key to preventing worse problems down the road.” More broadly, health care providers need to be prepared to provide people the care they need. Treat the problems earlier rather than later, he noted. “We need to be making available to patients options and resources to tackle these problems,” Al-Aly said.

Researchers also stressed the need for a better understanding of the interaction of mental health disorders both as risk for and sequela of COVID-19. •