

New findings from NHS CHECK find 1 in 10 NHS healthcare workers experienced suicidal thoughts during the COVID-19 pandemic

New findings from the NHS CHECK study have shown that approximately 1 in 10 healthcare workers in the National Health Service (NHS) had experienced suicidal thoughts during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper also showed change occurring over the course of six months, as 1 in 10 of those who had not had suicidal thoughts at the beginning of the pandemic reported thinking about suicide six months later. Of those who had not previously attempted suicide at the start of the pandemic, six months later 3.9% (244/6,323 people) of the same group had reported attempting suicide.

About the study

The prevalence of suicidal thoughts and behaviour among healthcare staff has long been a cause of concern; however, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been increased attention paid to it by the media and general public. Therefore, researchers from NHS CHECK wanted to investigate how this evolved over time and whether there was a relationship between increased suicidal thoughts and behaviour, and work-related factors. They were also interested in any differences between clinical staff such as doctors and nurses, and non-clinical staff including those working in administrative or facilities roles.

The study used data from NHS CHECK online surveys which asked NHS staff from 18 participating NHS trusts about their wellbeing and support at several timepoints from April 2020 to August 2021. This paper analysed healthcare workers' responses to whether they had experienced suicidal thoughts, attempted suicide, or harmed themselves without suicidal intentions.

Key findings

Prevalence of suicidal thoughts and behaviour

The analysis showed that, early in the pandemic, 10.8% of staff had thoughts about taking their own life, with 9% reporting those thoughts six months later, while 2.1% and 2.4% reported having attempted suicide at each timepoint. Non-suicidal self-injury was reported at 3.4% and 3.2% at baseline and six months, respectively. Because limited information is available on the rates of suicidal ideation and attempts in healthcare workers before the COVID-19 pandemic, it is difficult to estimate the influence of the pandemic on the initial survey results. However, because the study compared survey responses from two different periods, researchers were able to obtain the rates of staff reporting suicidal thoughts and behaviour for the first time since the start of the pandemic. Of those who did not report suicidal thoughts or behaviour at baseline, by six months, 11.3% had experienced suicidal thoughts, 3.9% had attempted suicide, and 6.1% had reported non-suicidal self-harm.

Work-related factors

There was a relationship between experiencing suicidal thoughts and behaviour and some work-related factors during the initial survey. These included limited access to personal protective equipment (PPE), lack of confidence in safety concerns being addressed or hesitancy to report them, lack of support from managers, reduced standard of care, and

potentially morally injurious events, defined as events which go against one's moral values. After six months from initial data collection, and after taking into account other factors like age, sex, ethnicity, and previous depression, the only work-related factor associated with suicidal thoughts was a lack of confidence in safety concerns being addressed, and this was found only among clinical staff. Researchers believe that these links could remain even after the pandemic, and are suggesting that mental health support for healthcare workers is increased and exposure to risk factors is managed wherever possible.

They also highlighted the importance of training managers to communicate effectively with their colleagues, as well as improving the ability of staff to raise safety concerns, both of which could decrease the prevalence of suicidal thoughts and behaviour amongst clinical and non-clinical healthcare workers.

If you or someone you know are struggling to cope and need someone to talk to, the Samaritans offer 24-hour support on 116 123, or you can email jo@samaritans.org for a response within 24 hours. The [NHS CHECK Wellbeing Support page](#) also offers information on accessing mental health support for NHS staff.