

# COVID-19, Nursing Staff And Mental Health: An Integrative Review

## RESUMO

**Objetivo:** Identificar o impacto da covid-19 na saúde mental dos profissionais de enfermagem que atuam no isolamento contra Covid-19. **Método:** Trata-se de revisão integrativa da literatura, realizada nas bases Literatura Latino-Americana e do Caribe em Ciências da Saúde (LILACS) e na biblioteca Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO), do período de 2020 a 2022, por se tratar do pico do período pandêmico. A análise dos dados foi realizada de forma descritiva. **Resultados:** A amostra foi composta por 15 artigos. Observou-se que os profissionais de enfermagem foram bastante afetados pelo cenário pandêmico, sendo que, destaca-se os problemas psicológicos e mentais. Entretanto, conseguiram construir estratégias de enfrentamento individuais e coletivas. A equipe de enfermagem trabalha na linha de frente, lidando diariamente com o medo do desconhecido, da exposição, do contágio, do medo e inseguranças. **Conclusão:** O trabalho dos profissionais de saúde é fundamental para a qualidade de vida da população, e por isso, é imprescindível o acompanhamento dos fatores estressantes que configuram risco para a saúde mental desses profissionais, como as condições de trabalho, carga horária extensa, pouco suporte psicológico e contato direto com infectados. Identificando as táticas de enfrentamento utilizadas para a manutenção da saúde mental dos profissionais de enfermagem, de modo a contribuir para o bem-estar físico e mental deste grande grupo.

**DESCRIPTORES:** Enfermagem; Covid-19; Pandemia; Saúde mental.

## SUMMARY

**Objective:** To identify the impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of nursing professionals working in COVID-19 isolation units. **Method:** This is an integrative literature review conducted using the Latin American and Caribbean Literature in Health Sciences (LILACS) and the Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO) databases, covering the period from 2020 to 2022, which corresponds to the peak of the pandemic. Data analysis was performed descriptively. **Results:** The sample consisted of 15 articles. It was observed that nursing professionals were significantly affected by the pandemic scenario, especially with regard to psychological and mental health issues. However, they managed to develop both individual and collective coping strategies. The nursing team works on the front line, dealing daily with the fear of the unknown, exposure, infection, and insecurity. **Conclusion:** The work of health professionals is essential for the population's quality of life. Therefore, monitoring the stress factors that pose a risk to the mental health of these professionals is crucial, such as working conditions, long hours, limited psychological support, and direct contact with infected individuals. Identifying the coping strategies used to maintain the mental health of nursing professionals can contribute to their physical and mental well-being.

**KEYWORDS:** Nursing; COVID-19; Pandemic; Mental Health.

## RESUMEN

**Objetivo:** Identificar el impacto del COVID-19 en la salud mental de los profesionales de enfermería que trabajan en unidades de aislamiento para COVID-19. **Método:** Se trata de una revisión integradora de la literatura, realizada en las bases de datos Literatura Latinoamericana y del Caribe en Ciencias de la Salud (LILACS) y la biblioteca Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO), en el período de 2020 a 2022, correspondiente al pico de la pandemia. El análisis de los datos fue descriptivo. **Resultados:** La muestra estuvo compuesta por 15 artículos. Se observó que los profesionales de enfermería fueron profundamente afectados por el escenario pandémico, destacándose los problemas psicológicos y de salud mental. No obstante, lograron desarrollar estrategias de afrontamiento tanto individuales como colectivas. El equipo de enfermería trabaja en la primera línea, enfrentando diariamente el miedo a lo desconocido, la exposición, el contagio y la inseguridad. **Conclusión:** El trabajo de los profesionales de salud es fundamental para la calidad de vida de la población. Por ello, es imprescindible el seguimiento de los factores estresantes que representan un riesgo para la salud mental de estos profesionales, como las condiciones laborales, las jornadas extensas, el escaso apoyo psicológico y el contacto directo con personas infectadas. Identificar las tácticas de afrontamiento utilizadas para mantener la salud mental de los profesionales de enfermería puede contribuir a su bienestar físico y mental.

**DESCRIPTORES:** Enfermería; COVID-19; Pandemia; Salud mental.

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## INTRODUCTION

The disease caused by the new coronavirus (abbreviated as Sars-CoV-2 or COVID-19), COVID-19, has turned into a pandemic that is difficult to control. The initial scenario was Wuhan, China, in December 2019, but by March 2020 there were already confirmed cases on all continents<sup>1</sup>. In Brazil, the first case of COVID-19 was identified on February 25, 2020, and according to data from the Ministry of Health, in August, the country already registered 3,057,470 confirmed cases and 101,752 deaths, ranking second in absolute numbers in the world<sup>2</sup>.

Since the H1N1 influenza pandemic, Covid-19 has become one of the most severe respiratory syndromes, not just a biological phenomenon, but also an event that has affected society at all levels of intensity and spread. One of the consequences of the pandemic was the triggering of public health crises in both developed and underdeveloped countries, as well as the worsening need for immediate care, which overloaded all levels of care, especially tertiary care (hospitals, intensive care medicine)<sup>3-5</sup>.

In the face of the pandemic, nursing has stood out as a profession and emerged as a social practice. This practice brings together the elements that make up human life in its many aspects and aims to prevent, promote and rehabilitate health. Nursing professionals comprise the largest professional category in the hospital area and the most present with the patient, with nursing professionals, whether nurses or nursing technicians, playing a leading role. This group is therefore more susceptible to a wide range of impacts, including psychological ones, due to their front-line work<sup>6</sup>.

The growth in the number of coronavirus cases and the high contagiousness of the disease has caused

many health professionals to become infected and even psychologically ill due to the vulnerability of their practice and the high level of responsibility for the lives of others. Furthermore, the unprecedented nature of simultaneous social distancing and isolation, in addition to the elements already mentioned, has led to the pandemic being called the "pandemic of fear and stress", with a high prevalence of negative psychological effects, especially irritability, anger, fear, insomnia and sadness<sup>7</sup>.

The experience of health professionals working in hospitals during the pandemic has been the subject of research, as it was an extreme situation. It has also been used to further research into the mental health of these groups, with a special interest in the effects on the day-to-day running of health services<sup>1</sup>.

Thus, the objective of this study was to identify the impact that working in a hospital isolation sector for Covid-19 can have on the mental health of nursing professionals. The relevance of this study is justified, considering the problem presented in the current scenario and the great impact on the mental health of nursing professionals, as well as the need to build care strategies for health professionals, aiming to create ways of caring for those who have dedicated their daily lives to caring for the life and health of others.

## METHOD

This integrative literature review was carried out in December 2022 and organized into six stages: formulation of the research question, bibliographic search, data extraction, critical evaluation, analysis and summarization of studies and synthesis of knowledge<sup>8</sup>. This review was written following the recommendations of the Preferred Reporting Items for System-

atic reviews and Meta Analyses (PRISMA) checklist<sup>9</sup>.

The following guiding question was drawn up: "What impact can working in a hospital isolation sector for Covid-19 have on the mental health of nursing professionals?" The descriptors used were Mental health, Covid-19, Health professional, Nursing and Pandemic, from the Health Sciences Descriptors (DeCS).

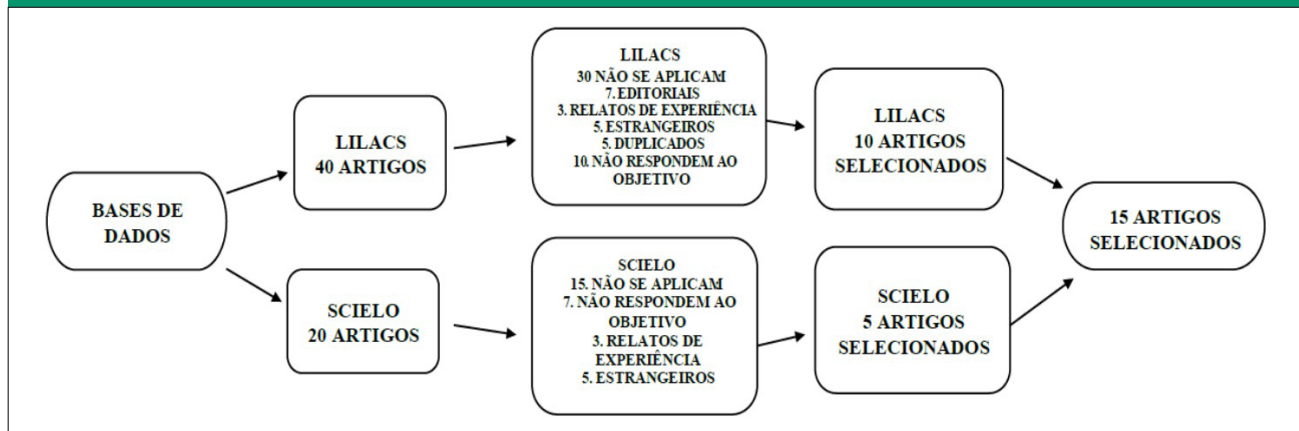
The bibliographic search was carried out in the Latin American and Caribbean Literature in Health Sciences (LILACS) database and the Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO) library, including scientific articles that were freely available in full, in Portuguese, related to the topic, that met the research objective and that corresponded to the period from 2020 to 2022, as this is the time of the pandemic. Book chapters, theses and non-scientific texts were excluded from the study. Duplicate articles were only counted once.

The data was analyzed descriptively and the results are presented in a flowchart and tables. Ethical aspects were respected, with reliable citation of sources and author definitions

## RESULTS

A search of the databases found 60 articles, 40 of which were in LILACS and 20 in SciELO, as shown in Figure 1. The sample consisted of 15 publications.

Figure 1- Flowchart of article selection. Porto Alegre, RS, Brazil, 2025.



Source: prepared by the authors, 2022.

After analyzing the titles and carefully reading the abstracts of these selected articles and applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria, 15 articles were selected that met the research objective (TABLE 1).

Chart 1 - Characterization of studies according to authorship, year of publication and title. Porto Alegre, RS, Brazil, 2025.

N	Autoria	Ano de publicação	Title
1	Dantas ESO <sup>1</sup>	2021	Mental health of health professionals in Brazil in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic
2	Teixeira et al <sup>10</sup>	2020	The health of health professionals in coping with the Covid-19 pandemic
3	Duarte MLC, Silva DG, Bagatini MMC <sup>11</sup>	2021	Nursing and mental health: a reflection in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic
4	Souza et al <sup>12</sup>	2021	Nursing work in the COVID-19 pandemic and repercussions for workers' mental health
5	Heliotério et al. <sup>13</sup>	2020	Covid-19: why is protecting the health of healthcare workers a priority in the fight against the pandemic?
6	Oliveira e Soares <sup>14</sup>	2020	The impact of the covid-19 pandemic on the mental health of nursing teams in brazil and coping with this challenge: an integrative review.
7	Nascimento et al <sup>15</sup>	2021	Coping strategies for maintaining workers' mental health in times of Covid-19: An Integrative Review.
8	Bezerra et al <sup>16</sup>	2020	The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of healthcare workers: an integrative review
9	Silva et al <sup>17</sup>	2020	The mental health of health professionals in the context of covid-19
10	Nabuco, Oliveira e Afonso <sup>18</sup>	2020	The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health: what is the role of Primary Health Care?
11	Moser et al <sup>19</sup>	2021	Mental health of health professionals in the coronavirus pandemic (Covid-19)
12	Horta et al <sup>20</sup>	2021	Stress and mental health of frontline COVID-19 workers in a general hospital
13	Santos et al <sup>21</sup>	2021	Depression and anxiety in nursing professionals during the covid-19 pandemic
14	Queiroz et al <sup>22</sup>	2021	COVID-19 "NEW": impacts on the mental health of nursing professionals?
15	Nazar et al <sup>23</sup>	2022	Who takes care of whom? Survey and characterization of the mental health of health professionals in the face of the covid-19 pandemic

Source: prepared by the authors, 2022.

After a thorough reading of the articles included in the study, the data was grouped and two thematic categories emerged: the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the mental health of nursing professionals and coping strategies for maintaining mental health.

The studies pointed to a series of negative impacts caused by the pandemic, compromising the mental health of the entire team. On the other hand, many professionals have managed to identify this problem and have built individual and collective coping strategies.

## DISCUSSION

The discussion will be presented according to thematic categories.

### **The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of nursing professionals**

The studies point out that when it comes to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of nursing professionals, it is worth noting that the entire nursing team is exposed during the working day, as they are in direct contact with the patient. In addition, each worker who falls ill becomes a risk to the population, either because of the possibility of contaminating the individuals with whom they live (such as their family), but also because they become one less worker, due to the need for leave/isolation, which will consequently cause a greater burden on other professionals who have continued to fight the virus<sup>10,11</sup>.

Nursing staff work on the front line, dealing daily with the fear of the unknown, exposure, contagion and insecurity. Faced with this scenario of calamity, various protocols, manuals and changes were made abruptly and instantaneously in various care sectors. The need to adapt

very quickly increased the psychological demands and work-related syndromes of this category, which quickly had to assume the ethical commitment of their profession, providing health care for an untreated disease, even if it could become a risk to themselves<sup>6</sup>.

It is important to note that in 2020 the country had 2,305,946 professionals registered with the Regional Nursing Councils<sup>24</sup>, making up a very significant class. Of these, many work in hospital environments and are subjected to intense experiences, dealing exhaustively with fear, pain, suffering, death and recovery. This scenario reinforces the emergence of emotional suffering, with depression, isolation, anxiety and fears being some of the most common problems<sup>25</sup>.

In addition, hospital admissions increased significantly during the pandemic, raising concerns about the collapse of health care and the health of those who care for them<sup>26</sup>. The concern extended to nursing professionals, as they showed high levels of anxiety and depression. Given this context, the WHO has warned about the protection of professionals in inpatient units from chronic stress, pointing to the possible impact on their mental health, which could consequently lead to impaired performance of their daily activities<sup>27</sup>.

The impacts of the pandemic are large-scale, because in addition to the old demands, there is a high risk of contamination by the new virus, the possibility of contaminating a family member, the lack of personal protective equipment (PPE), as well as ethical problems that increase the psychological suffering of professionals working on the front line, thus impacting the mental health of professionals<sup>12,13,16</sup>.

In view of these factors, it is

worth mentioning that the physical symptoms related to COVID-19 are present in a medium to severe form, highlighting: anxiety (28.8%), depression (16.5%) and stress (8.1%) respectively<sup>16</sup>. When it comes to other illnesses that can be caused by high levels of work-related stress, the following are mentioned: high blood pressure, nausea, cardiovascular and enteric diseases and sleep disorders<sup>28</sup>.

In view of this, it should be noted that the group most prone to developing physical, emotional and mental imbalances is women, due to the fact that there are more of them in nursing and they have more external tasks, such as household chores, caring for children and family, as well as often having more than one job<sup>16,17</sup>. Although it is not the aim of this study, it is undeniable that the higher rates of illness among women and female overload are related to deeper structural issues regarding gender relations in Brazil.

It has been shown that professionals who accompanied infected patients, mainly in hospitalization units, emergency rooms and ICUs, were subjected to various stress factors, presenting a double risk: physical and mental impairment. In some cases, direct contact with death led to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which is why it was necessary to develop ways of easing the pain and suffering of the unknown<sup>18</sup>.

Another situation strongly discussed in the studies was the incessant fear of changing from professional to patient, due to contamination and the deaths of colleagues, highlighting the emotional overload and mental health maladjustments of these professionals.

The work of nursing professionals was highlighted during the pandemic period, as they worked without adequate support, since there was a

shortage of protective equipment, a lack of drugs for specific treatment, a lack of ventilators and even oxygen, leading the group to extreme stress. The choice of priorities in patient care, in the face of a lack of technical or human resources, led to feelings of pressure, which hindered their daily work in hospitalization and intensive care units<sup>29</sup>.

Faced with this necessity, however, nursing professionals have been building their coping strategies, looking for ways out of the adversities mentioned here on a daily basis, which will be dealt with below.

### **Coping strategies to maintain the mental health of nursing professionals**

Preserving the mental health of nursing workers in the context of the pandemic was a difficult but essential task. The well-being of nursing professionals was a fundamental aspect for health services to continue operating, so it was urgent to build coping strategies in order to maintain or recover mental health and strengthen the worker who lives directly with the patient<sup>15,20,23</sup>.

It is important to highlight that communication and interpersonal interaction are coping attitudes that help promote well-being for nursing professionals, as team support prevents individualization, competitiveness and insecurity<sup>17</sup>.

Clear and direct communication is an essential coping tool, as talking about what you feel and how you feel in this period of uncertainty and pain is therapeutic. Another strategy used was to change the environment and aspect of work, but all these changes were made with the help of the team so as to promote the well-being of everyone involved<sup>17</sup>.

The mental health care policy, although precarious at certain points, has the potential to address

emerging situations such as that experienced by nursing professionals, especially those who have worked in hospitalization units having direct experience with patients infected with COVID-19<sup>15</sup>.

Welcoming the demands of health professionals and taking care to promote mental health means that immediate plans and actions must be put in place to screen for and treat cases of depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, suicidal ideation and other conditions. Continuous emotional care must be guaranteed, as signs and symptoms can last for months or years, causing emotional exhaustion<sup>1</sup>.

It is of great value that effective strategies are found to deal with stress, impacting positive mental health outcomes. Social support can protect individuals from stressful conditions and poor health<sup>30</sup>. Within this context, the role of health service managers arises, as they are not only responsible for caring for the service itself, but mainly for the employees.

Managers developed coping strategies such as taking psychological stress seriously, conveying appreciation, promoting self-care and offering professional support in order to minimize the impact on mental health. In addition, it was necessary to create tools and flows to prevent and promote the mental health of health professionals, as well as to identify any psychological demands of this category early on<sup>31</sup>.

### **FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Through this study, it was possible to highlight the main impacts caused by COVID-19 and the ways in which nursing professionals cope in order to improve their quality of life.

Within this context, various cop-

ing strategies were adopted to preserve the mental health of the professionals, a difficult task given that the mental health of these workers was destabilized. One of the important practices was to encourage interpersonal communication, as well as the need for immediate plans and actions to track and treat cases of depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, suicidal ideation and other conditions. These actions were aimed at providing quality emotional care, so as to guarantee care for the caregiver.

It is hoped that the results of this study can contribute to the implementation of coping actions and effective and immediate measures so that the mental health of nursing professionals is preserved and cared for. This work can contribute to the development of actions to improve the quality of care for this population, which is so significant in number and importance.

Finally, it should be noted that future studies could investigate the medium and long-term impacts of COVID-19 on the mental health of nurses and nursing technicians who worked on the front line, as well as expanding the investigation to other health categories.

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