

Article

Impact of COVID-19 on the Mental Health of the Elderly

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ABSTRACT

The elderly have always been considered to be people at risk, due to the various physical and psychological health problems they present. However, during this time of pandemic these health problems have been exacerbated due to isolation, negative thoughts, and deaths of family members, among other factors. This has led to depressive episodes, anxiety, insomnia, stress, and suicidal ideation. The objective of this review is to analyze how COVID-19 has impacted the mental health of the elderly, through various publications between 2020 and 2022. After conducting a search in the following databases: SCIELO, EBSCO, Pubmed, REDIB, Science Direct, Redalyc, Proquest, and Dialnet, 18 articles were found that met the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Finally, it was found that the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively affected the mental health of the elderly, which is why some authors state that it is very important that the countries of the world have strategies or programs to support adults to be able to face this pandemic adequately and thus be prepared for similar situations that may occur in the future.

Impacto de la COVID-19 en la Salud Mental de las Personas de la Tercera Edad

RESUMEN

Las personas de la tercera edad siempre han sido consideradas personas de riesgo, debido a los diversos problemas de salud físicos y psicológicos que presentan. Sin embargo, durante esta época de pandemia estos problemas de salud se han exacerbado debido al aislamiento, las ideas negativas, las muertes de familiares, entre otros; generando episodios depresivos, ansiosos, insomnio, estrés e ideación suicida. De esta manera, el objetivo de la presente revisión es analizar cómo el virus del COVID-19 ha impactado en la salud mental del adulto mayor, a través de diversas publicaciones entre el 2020 y 2022. Luego de realizar una búsqueda en las bases de datos SCIELO, EBSCO, Pubmed, REDIB, Science direct, Redalyc, Proquest y Dialnet, se encontraron 18 artículos que cumplían con los criterios de inclusión y exclusión. Finalmente, se halló que la pandemia del COVID-19 ha afectado negativamente en la salud mental de las personas de la tercera edad, motivo por el cual algunos autores plantean que es muy importante que los países del mundo cuenten con estrategias o programas de apoyo al adulto mayor para poder enfrentar de manera adecuada esta pandemia y de esta forma estar preparada ante futuras situaciones similares.

Palabras clave

Pandemia
COVID-19
Salud mental
Adulto mayor

Introduction

An influenza contagion was detected in Wuhan (China) at the end of 2019, infecting people rapidly. No organization at the global level, not even the WHO itself, expected it to be the beginning of a worldwide pandemic (Estévez, 2020). Given the name SARS-CoV-2, this pandemic caused the confinement of inhabitants in different cities around the world (Montero, 2018), to prevent the infection from continuing to grow and to avoid the death of many people, mainly the elderly.

In this scenario, the WHO recommends a focus on mental health care, especially for the elderly, since isolation was mandatory because they are the ones most likely to be infected. According to Díaz and Toro (2020), the mortality rates between 1% and 3% of those infected were particularly high among the elderly. Researchers Pal et al. (2020), Cañete et al. (2020), Ruiz and Jiménez (2020), and Pérez et al. (2020) agree, confirming that the high mortality rate was due to the pandemic. According to Etienne (2018), mental health difficulties in the United States have a population incidence of about 24.2%.

According to Lozano (2020), due to the confinement and the number of infected people, both health personnel and the general population reported various symptoms such as stress, depression, anxiety, anger, insomnia, denial, and fear. Similarly, Caballero and Campo (2020), Sarabia (2020), Acosta and Iglesias (2020), and Vásquez et al. (2020) highlighted in their research how COVID-19 influences mental health, especially in elderly adults as a result of confinement (Aguilar et al., 2020). Also, Pryanka and Ramesh (2021), Stephenson et al. (2020), and Wang et al. (2022) concluded that the pandemic has caused an increase in depression, stress, anger, and insomnia in the population, with a higher percentage in older adults. Moreover, Dura et al. (2022), Delgado et al. (2021), and Yazeed et al. (2022) confirmed that mental health is negatively impacted by COVID-19.

The consequences of isolation in the elderly are a public health problem that has increased in the wake of COVID-19 (Armitage, 2020). Santini (2020) state that isolation causes the elderly to be more likely to have depression and anxiety, since these individuals tend to generate various unpleasant negative emotions generally caused by information or thoughts related to COVID-19.

The objective of this study is to analyze how COVID-19 has impacted the mental health of the elderly, based on various international and national research studies, in order to understand how these problems have been dealt with worldwide (Rojas, Castaño & Restripo, 2018).

According to Maceo et al. (2020), the new disease generates a severe respiratory syndrome, affecting countless people and especially the elderly, especially those with diabetes, and cardiac, pulmonary, and renal diseases. According to Hernández (2020), COVID-19 has an unfavorable influence on the mental health of the population, especially the elderly. These results coincide with the research of Ramírez et al. (2020), who analyzed the effects of isolation on mental health, concluding that it generates disturbances in the mental health of the population, especially in those with pre-existing mental disorders and especially older adults.

In this sense, according to López (2020), COVID-19 has an impact on the population in terms of anxiety, depression, stress, and sleep disorders, affecting the population of lower socioeconomic level to a greater extent. Similarly, Ochoa et al. (2021) measured

the psychological impact of COVID-19 on adults, concluding that there is a threat to mental health in 20% of the population, and that there should be services to treat mental health.

At the same time, Alarcón et al. (2022) reflected on how COVID-19 impacted on the confinement of people to avoid contagion, reaching the conclusion that professional health services should be increased to provide mental support to the confined population. In the same vein, Álvarez and Toro (2021) found evidence of negative effects on mental health and concluded that it has a negative psychological influence on the population.

According to Chavarría et al. (2020), the pandemic has affected the family and the self-esteem of each member, altering people's lifestyles. In the same vein, Martínez (2020) demonstrated the existence of anxiety problems, insomnia, general fears, and depression, in children, adolescents, and adults (Cuenca et al., 2020; Paricio & Pando 2020). Furthermore, Álvarez (2020) highlighted the importance of studies and actions of social services in order to prevent the pandemic from continuing to negatively influence the population, increasing cases of anxiety, stress, and depression (Petticrew, 2006). Finally, according to Rodríguez et al. (2020), COVID-19 affects part of the well-being of people, which represents a challenge for health entities providing services to the population for the reduction of mental health problems.

Methodology

To conduct the research, a search was carried out in various databases taking into account the guidelines proposed by the PRISMA statement (Page, 2021).

Study Selection Criteria

In order to carry out the present investigation, specific criteria were applied in line with the objectives of the review. Regarding the inclusion criteria, the following factors were considered: the source of the documents, limited to articles published in scientific journals; a defined period of time, between the years 2020 and 2022; the inclusion of both the English and Spanish languages; and the condition that the articles had to be focused on the population of older adults as the object of study.

On the other hand, as far as exclusion criteria were concerned, certain types of documents that did not fit the purpose of the research were discarded. These included essays, reviews, papers, letters to the author, interviews, and experimental studies. Likewise, articles that did not focus on the population of older adults were excluded, as this was the main population of interest in the research.

Databases and Search Strategy

For the research of scientific articles, eight electronic databases were used (SCIELO, EBSCO, Pubmed, REDIB, Science Direct, Redalyc, Proquest, and Dialnet). Related articles in Spanish and English were identified; the search for articles was carried out taking into account the keywords "pandemic", "mental health", "older adult", "COVID" and "elderly"; the search years were also filtered in a range from 2020 to 2022; finally, the set of documents was limited to journal articles. The selection of articles was carried out by means of an in-depth review.

Results

After filtering, each of the selected articles was read completely in order to continue refining the selection, taking into account the exclusion and inclusion criteria. As a result, 18 articles were found, which have been reviewed and *synthesized in the present work*.

The description of the 18 articles can be seen in [Table 1](#). For each article found, the author, year, database, title, type of document, and a brief summary of each article are presented.

Discussion

This study confirmed that the COVID-19 pandemic has an impact on people's mental health ([Huarcaya, 2020](#); [Palomera et al., 2021](#); [Paredes, Dawaher & Chérrez, 2020](#); [Miranda, 2018](#)), especially in the elderly, because isolation due to the pandemic generates feelings such as fear, anger, and frustration, among others. These, when constant, create other psychological problems such as depression and anxiety ([Armitage, 2020](#); [Vázquez et al., 2020](#); [Delgado et al., 2021](#); [Dura et al., 2022](#); [Ballena et al., 2021](#)).

This systematic review was based on the PRISMA method ([Figure 1](#)), which helped to provide an organized and clear picture of the impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of the elderly. On the other hand, it can be observed that most of the results are from review articles ([Hernández & Grace, 2021](#)). Nevertheless, this review allows us to reveal in a general way the research published during this pandemic ([Buitrago et al., 2020](#)), taking into consideration the advantages of the PRISMA method described above.

Different research investigations have been reviewed to obtain an overall picture of how COVID-19 has impacted the mental health of the older adult ([Ruiz & Gómez, 2021](#)), among them we have [Armitage \(2020\)](#), [Delgado et al. \(2021\)](#), and [Dos Santos et al. \(2020\)](#) who state that isolation due to the pandemic caused

older adults to have problems with their mental health, especially anxiety and depression ([Bertha, 2021](#)). Likewise, [Álvarez \(2020\)](#) and [López \(2020\)](#) agree that COVID-19 has increased the development of mental illness and that its effects will continue even decades after the pandemic is over. Similarly, [Porcel et al. \(2020\)](#) and [González et al. \(2021\)](#) state that the long-term psychological reactions caused by COVID-19 tend to be emotional sequelae; therefore, they recommend that public health measures be taken to address the pandemic for the good of the individual and the community.

While what has been highlighted by these authors is important, it is worth mentioning that it is relevant for the government of each country to focus and plan its attention on psychosocial support and mental health during the pandemic because they are fundamental to health, nutrition, social security, work, education, and justice ([Ribot, Chang & González, 2020](#)). This will allow countries to focus on their economic and social recovery when they emerge from the pandemic ([González & Labad, 2020](#); [Santini, 2020](#); [Guerrero, 2021](#)). Additionally, ICTs are shown to be useful for uses related to cognition, entertainment, information, and socialization during the pandemic ([Dura et al., 2022](#)).

Regarding the review of original articles, we can find research with quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methodologies. Firstly, through statistics, emotional characteristics and depressive episodes that are generated in older adults were described, which create an imbalance in their well-being. Among these characteristics are anxiety, depression, stress, and insomnia; leading to the conclusion that the pandemic has negatively affected the mental health of the elderly population; however, several authors stated that, if the person has ever been seen by a psychiatrist or psychologist, there are mechanisms that cause the symptomatology to be less ([Naranjo et al., 2021](#); [Chávez et al., 2021](#); [Martínez et al., 2021](#); [Sotomayor et al., 2021](#)).

Likewise, through interviews to collect empirical data, we inquired about COVID-19 ([OMS, 2021](#)), social isolation, and their relationship with mental health ([Ferreira, Coronel & Rivarola, 2020](#)). Thus, it was found that older adults have been emotionally affected by quarantine, generating negative effects on mental health, presenting unpleasant feelings and constant fear due to COVID-19, which has affected their daily lives ([Lucas et al., 2021](#)).

Conclusions

Based on these results, it can be observed that COVID 19 has negatively affected the mental health of the elderly. Likewise, the relevance of mental health in the elderly is demonstrated, since it allows the human being to develop adequately in their environment; for this, it is necessary that the government invests its budget and designs support programs for vulnerable people during this pandemic and that these individuals know what to do when symptoms occur and where to go.

Through ICT, telepsychology can be offered as a means of help and support for the elderly, especially if they are in poor health and cannot travel; in addition, it is beneficial for the state to create free programs for the benefit of people who do not have sufficient resources to attend a private consultation, all with the assurance of being able to improve mental health in the pandemic situation.

Figure 1
Flowchart Followed to Perform the Review in the Databases

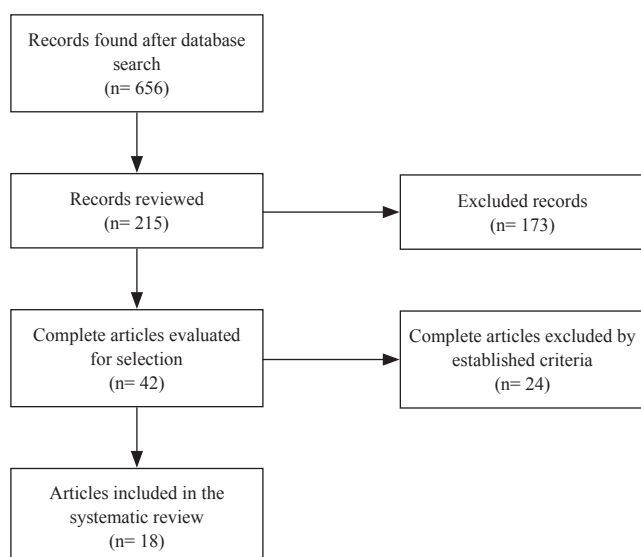


Table 1
Summary of Articles Included in the Systematic Review

N°	Database	Author/year	Title	Type of document	Summary
1	Pubmed	Santini (2020)	Social disconnectedness, perceived isolation, and symptoms of depression and anxiety among older Americans (NSHAP): A longitudinal mediation analysis	Original article	The research had a population of 3,005 adults aged 57 to 85 years, in which it is evident that social disconnection produced greater symptoms of depression and anxiety symptoms. Therefore initiatives are proposed so that public systems can create programs to reduce isolation through integration by means of social networks and participation in community or social activities, contributing to strengthen social ties and protecting people from affective disorders.
2	Scielo	Armitage (2020)	COVID-19 and the consequences of isolating the elderly	Review article	The article concludes that isolating the elderly could reduce transmission, especially in people with comorbidities or high-risk groups. However, isolation affects the mental health of the elderly, especially in terms of anxiety and depression; therefore, it is necessary to implement preventive measures or strategies in this population to prevent and care for mental health.
3	Scielo	González et al. (2020)	Psychological impact of sociodemographic factors and medical conditions in older adults during the COVID-19 pandemic in Mexico	Original article	The study finds that the elderly not only present physical health problems, but also that the pandemic has affected their mental health. A total of 2,992 elderly people were evaluated, with the result that elderly women had higher values of depressive symptoms and anxiety compared to men. It is recommended to plan various strategies to dedicate more attention to mental health in the elderly.
4	EBSCO	Bonilla et al. (2020)	Health Strategies in Latin America for the Elderly in relation to COVID-19	Original article	In the present study, 45 documents from 13 Latin American countries were reviewed. Strategies were developed according to the effect caused by the pandemic on the elderly, which made it possible to classify health actions focused on promotion, rehabilitation, prevention and restoration. It was concluded that in the health emergency, mental and emotional indicators, their impact and psychological resources did not prevail as in the new normal.
5	Science Direct	Porcel et al. (2020)	Older people, dependence and vulnerability in the coronavirus pandemic: Emergence of social and healthcare integration	Review article	The authors conclude that the current pandemic (COVID-19) mainly affects the elderly worldwide; therefore, the importance is highlighted of preparing ourselves internationally through protocols in order to be able to help and serve hospitalized older adults, in palliative care, among others.
6	Redalyc	Iacub et al. (2020)	Emotional aspects of the Elderly during Pandemic COVID 19	Original article	The emotional effects of the pandemic and preventive social isolation on people aged 60 years were studied and analyzed. A survey was carried out with 757 people, through a questionnaire in which significant differences were found in emotional states by age group and gender.
7	Scielo	Granda et al. (2021)	Effects of isolation in older adults during the COVID-19 pandemic: A review of the literature	Review article	Isolation was a mandatory measure during the pandemic, which has caused negative effects in the elderly, mainly in mental health. A review of articles published since 2019 was performed, and these articles provide information on the moment and in the short term; therefore, it is not possible to know the psychological consequences in the long term. It is concluded that it is very important to create measures to reduce all physical and mental effects, according to the situation in each country.
8	Scielo	Dos Santos et al. (2020)	Older adults living alone: Knowledge and preventive measures in the face of the new coronavirus	Original article	The authors conducted a quantitative study with 123 older adults living alone. They concluded that the elderly who had some knowledge of COVID-19 did not put prevention measures into practice. Likewise, older adults who live alone and have low levels of schooling are more vulnerable to COVID-19.
9	Dialnet	Vázquez et al. (2020)	Mental health, confinement, and coronavirus worry: A qualitative study	Review article	In this article, it is shown that depression, concerns about the coronavirus, anxiety, and health in general affect the elderly emotionally due to the concepts of vulnerability they have, which has a marked effect on mental health.
10	Scielo	González et al. (2021)	Mental health care in older adults in the transition COVID-19 pandemic - New normal	Review article	The objective was to analyze and propose necessary measures to care for the mental health of older adults in the post-pandemic transition. It is mentioned that social distancing has distanced older adults from their friends and family, which has exacerbated the appearance of various psychological problems. These should be treated to prevent them from becoming more prevalent over time. It is concluded that it is important to promote strategies with scientific support in order to recover the mental health of older adults and thus give importance to health.

11	Dialnet	Lucas et al. (2021)	Negative emotional effects in older adults throughout quarantine due to COVID-19 in Santo Domingo	Original article	The authors argue that, because of quarantines, older adults have been affected emotionally, with negative effects on their mental health. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with older adults in a gerontological center, where information was collected to understand how they feel. It was discussed how older adults present unpleasant feelings and constant fear because of COVID-19, which has affected their daily life.
12	REDIB	Sotomayor et al. (2021)	Impact on the mental health of older adults post pandemic COVID-19, El Oro Ecuador	Original article	The purpose of the study was to reduce the negative psychological effects and to strengthen emotional support strategies. It was a descriptive and cross-sectional study, where 135 adults between 60 and 70 years of age were evaluated. All those evaluated had comorbidities. It was concluded that older adults need psychological support due to confinement as a result of the pandemic and its multiple consequences on mental health.
13	Dialnet	Guerrero (2021)	Family integration activities in adult mental health older in the context of Sars-Cov-2/COVID-19 pandemic	Original article	Information was collected from various databases, with the conclusion being reached that COVID-19 has had consequences not only on physical health, but also on the mental health of the elderly, since this age group was at greater risk due to the associated comorbidities; within the symptoms associated with quarantine we can find: anxiety, fear, depression, and anguish. Therefore integration strategies are proposed for the elderly with their families so that they can improve their security, feel loved, and strengthen their family ties.
14	Proquest	Martínez et al. (2021)	Psychological impact of confinement in a sample of older people: Longitudinal study before and during the pandemic	Original article	The impact of COVID-19 on people over 65 years of age was analyzed at two points in time (the first wave and the second wave). A total of 141 elderly people were evaluated. It is concluded that, from the first wave to the second, older adults intensified psychological symptoms such as depression, sadness, stress, insomnia, and fear, which affect their levels of well-being.
15	EBSCO	Chávez et al. (2021)	Relationship between depression and anxiety with social isolation due to confinement in adults	Original article	It is proposed that social isolation due to the pandemic has created anxiety and depression with greater intensity in the elderly. A cross-sectional descriptive study was carried out with 286 persons aged 65 years, with the results showing that 51.1% presented some type of depression; furthermore, a statistically significant relationship was found between social isolation, anxiety, and depression.
16	EBSCO	Naranjo et al. (2021)	Emotional states of older adults in social isolation during COVID-19	Original article	The high number of infections due to COVID-19 has caused the social aspect, negative thoughts, and emotions to alter the mental health of older adults. A descriptive-cross-sectional study was carried out in which the study population was 100 older adults. A normal level of irritability was found, both external (68.0 %) and internal (70.0 %), as well as a mild level of anxiety (73.0 %) and a mild level of depression.
17	Pubmed	Delgado et al. (2021)	COVID-19 infodemic and adult and elderly mental health: A scoping review	Review article	In the present study, information was collected from 33 articles. These articles analyzed the effect of the pandemic on mental health in the elderly. The most relevant repercussions were anxiety, stress, and depression. It is important to investigate the repercussions on mental health, in order to be able to generate mechanisms of support, especially in the elderly population.
18	Pubmed	Dura et al. (2022)	The Impact of COVID-19 Confinement on Cognition and Mental Health and Technology Use Among Socially Vulnerable Older People: Retrospective Cohort Study	Review article	It was found that the first months of the pandemic did not affect cognition, depression, or perceived health status. However, the confinement of vulnerable people caused mental health problems to increase and exacerbate. In addition, the authors demonstrate that ICTs are useful for cognition, entertainment, information, and socialization during the pandemic, but evidence is still needed to support these interventions.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed to the preparation of this document.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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