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# EATING DISORDERS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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#### **ABSTRACT**

The COVID-19 pandemic is currently underway, so the policy of keeping a distance and staying at home must be implemented. Information about the pandemic is increasing every day, raising concerns that can affect mental health. Eating disorders as a mental disorder related to eating behaviors has also been affected by this pandemic. This article was written with the aim of knowing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on eating disorders condition. The method used is literature review using articles (available in NCBI and google scholar) and a book published by American Psychiatric Association in 2013. The keywords used in searching for articles are COVID-19, eating disorder, mental health, and pandemic so that 25 articles obtained and 21 articles (from 2018-2020) used in this literature review, and then an analysis is carried out using the systematic literature review method. Several studies have shown the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health. In research related to eating disorders, it was found that the COVID-19 pandemic can affect both individuals with eating disorders and the general population, and also affect the care for patients with eating disorders. The analysis of several articles shows that the COVID-19 pandemic can exacerbate the state of eating disorders and can increase the risk of developing eating disorders. The COVID-19 pandemic has also led to changes in care provided to patients with eating disorders where safety procedures must be implemented and telehealth becomes an alternative approach.

**Keywords**: COVID-19; eating disorders; mental health; pandemic

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In December 2019, China faced a deadly respiratory system disease, when a group of patients with unknown causes of pneumonia were reported by several local health facilities to be linked to the seafood wholesale market in Wuhan. The disease has become an international epidemic and is known as COVID-19, a respiratory disease caused by novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) (Madabhavi, Sarkar, & Kadakol, 2020; Zhu et al., 2020). Every day the information about this new corona virus increases. More data about this virus are collected around the world regarding its route, transmission, incubation period, reservoir, symptoms, and also clinical outcomes (Corman et al., 2020). Since the COVID-19 outbreak, an increasing amount of information and growing concerns have had an impact on global mental health, which can be a challenge for patients, the general population, as well as policy makers and health organizations and teams. However, the impact of such viral infection on global mental health is currently overlooked (Torales, O'Higgins, Castaldelli-Maia, & Ventriglio, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic can lead to the development of eating disorders (ED) behaviors in some people and exacerbate existing pathologies in others, where ED behaviors tends to be exacerbated by the pandemic through multiple pathways, especially in vulnerable groups including those with body image and also eating concerns (Rodgers et al., 2020). In vulnerable individuals, concerns about health and fitness during quarantine may be a precipitating factor for the development of ED, while other factors such as increased social media use time as well as the toxic influence of objectification of thin ideal become further risk factors (Fernández-Aranda et al., 2020). In individuals with ED, the COVID-19 pandemic is most likely to contribute to the worsening mental health of such individuals, for example quarantine enforcement may magnify the general consequences of anorexia nervosa i.e. isolation and loneliness where many patients with anorexia nervosa are already physically and emotionally isolated (Fernández-Aranda et al., 2020; Touyz, Lacey, & Hay, 2020; Weissman, Bauer, & Thomas, 2020).

The situation then raised the urgency that individuals with ED be assured of receiving care, although the policy of staying at home and "social distancing" during the COVID-19 pandemic led to sudden changes in clinical services, including in individuals with ED (Weissman, Bauer, et al., 2020). Only urgent visits and inpatient treatment for severe ED cases are provided in COVID-19 context, and in many health settings, then online care has been recommended (if possible) rather than face-to-face (Fernández-Aranda et al., 2020). Major safety measures must be implemented, by inpatient or residential services, for staff and patients, while care in most outpatient services has shifted to a telehealth approach (Weissman, Klump, et al., 2020). Meanwhile, the effects of COVID-19 disease on individuals with ED are still unknown, but they are physically at high risk for example due to electrolyte disturbances in bullimia nervosa, frailty in anorexia nervosa, and cardiovascular risk in binge eating disorder (Fernández-Aranda et al., 2020). Based on the introduction above, this literature review was written with the aim of knowing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on eating disorders so that this article can provide information and increase awareness in the community.

## **METHOD**

The method used is literature review which is literature study by critically reviewing ideas, knowledge, or findings on existing literature. The literature sources used are from NCBI and Google Scholar database and a book published by American Psychiatric Association in 2013. The keywords used in searching for articles are COVID-19, eating disorder, mental health, and pandemic so that 25 articles obtained and 21 articles (from 2018-2020) used in this literature review. These articles are then analyzed by systematic literature review (SLR) method. Through this SLR method, the process of identification, assessment, evaluation, and interpretation of articles with the focus of relevant topics is carried out.

# **RESULTS**

Research conducted by Li et al. using samples and analysis of posts on Weibo with the Online Ecological Recognition (OER) approach showed that after the declaration or announcement regarding COVID-19 in China, there was an increase in negative emotions (anxiety, depression, anger) and sensitivity to social risk, as well as a decrease in positive emotions and life satisfaction. In addition, it was also found that people

show less concern about leisure time and friends and more concern about health and family (Li, Wang, Xue, Zhao, & Zhu, 2020).

A study in China by Wang et al. found that more than half of the study respondents reported moderate-severe psychological impacts in the early phases of the COVID-19 outbreak. A higher psychological impact was associated with a woman's gender, student status, and certain physical symptoms, in which the group also had higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. While lower psychological impact and lower levels of stress, anxiety, and depression are associated with current and specific health information (Wang et al., 2020).

Phillipou et al. conducted research in Australia aimed at identifying changes in eating and exercising habits during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study sample was conducted on groups with ED and general population groups.. In that study, it was found that the group with ED had increased restricting, binge eating, purging, and exercising behaviors. While in the general population group, increased in restricting and binge eating behaviours were found, and respondents also reported that exercise was much lower than before the pandemic (Phillipou et al., 2020).

Research in the UK by Branley-Bell & Talbot aimed to determine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was carried out on samples currently experiencing or recovering from ED. The results showed the COVID-19 pandemic had a profound negative impact on individuals with ED, showing adverse effects on psychological well-being including low feelings of social support, decreased feelings of control, increased thinking or rumination about eating disorders, and increased feelings of social isolation (Branley-Bell & Talbot, 2020).

Through research on the initial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on individuals with eating disorders conducted by Termorshuizen et al. to participants in the United States and Netherlands, it is known that participants with anorexia nervosa reported increased restriction and fear of the ability to obtain food that matched their meal plan. While individuals with bulimia nervosa and binge eating disorder reported an increase in binge eating episodes and a desire to binge (Termorshuizen et al., 2020).

Research by Haddad et al. conducted online using the Eating disorders Examination - Questionnaire (EDE-Q) with participants of the lebanese population, found that the fear of COVID-19 infection was related to eating restrictions, as well as the difficulty of weight and body shape in the entire sample, especially in the dietitian client group. This led to the need for public health control measures to determine ED factors during the COVID-19 outbreak as well as to reduce the risk of psychological distress through the promotion of healthy habitss (Haddad et al., 2020).

In the current state of the COVID-19 pandemic, ED care services for pediatrics at a public pediatric tertiary hospital in Singapore have made significant adaptations to the service model provided and responded to changes in the psychosocial needs of patients. In outpatient and inpatient settings, modular staffing has been implemented, requiring task shifting and increasing the use of technology in communication. Telemedicine is also applied given the declining outpatient capacity and to minimize non-urgent visits to

the hospital. In addition, partnerships with school and other community counselors have also been leveraged (Davis et al., 2020).

#### **DISCUSSION**

Eating disorders (ED) is a chronic disease in the form of eating behavior disorder or weight control behavior disorder, which in the DSM-IV are classified into three types: anorexia nervosa, bullimia nervosa, and binge eating disorders (Krisnani, Santoso, & Putri, 2018). In DSM-V, ED is included in the feeding and eating disorders category, characterized by a persistent disturbance of eating or eating-related behavior that results in changes in food consumption or absorption and significantly impairs physical health and psychosocial functioning ("Diagnostic Stat. Man. Ment. Disord. 5th Ed.," 2013).

Eating disorders and related mental health symptoms may be exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic due to increased economic tensions resulting in food insecurity (limited access to food due to economic hardship) (Weissman, Bauer, et al., 2020). Both low and very low food security are associated with the possibility to meet the criteria of binge eating disorders and bulimia nervosa (Lydecker & Grilo, 2019; Rasmusson, Lydecker, Coffino, White, & Grilo, 2018).

The increased risk of ED behavior related to media effects can also be caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Media plays a role in three ways: (1) specific exposure to harmful eating and appearances related to media, especially social media; (2) Effects of media use in general; (3) Increased use of video conferencing while working at home (Rodgers et al., 2020). The restrictive diet that increased during the COVID-19 pandemic may occur due to the fear of leaving home to buy food or getting rid of certain foods that are feared to be contaminated. This is because individuals are afraid of contracting COVID-19 so that eventually they experience increased concern about the quality of food and its ability to become a vehicle of transmission or contangion (Rodgers et al., 2020). Furthermore, stressful life events, anxiety, social isolation & declining social support, and trauma and abuse are broader ED risk factors in addition to specific risk factors including food access, media and media messages, limitations in exercise, and limited access to healthcare (Cooper et al., 2020).

Treatment of individuals with ED may be difficult during the pandemic, this is due to the depletion of health service resources due to the risk of contracting COVID-19 (if they are physically in a medical environment) and due to COVID-19 treatment, so that in the end the telehealth check-up becomes an alternative approach even though the method has limited capacity in monitoring weight changes, vital signs, and other important physiological assessments (Cooper et al., 2020). Some simple suggestions for the general population that can be applied in order to reduce the risk of developing mental health problems during the COVID-19 pandemic: (1) reducing sources of stress, by limiting the amount of time to find new information and always rely in official sources instead of uncontrolled sources (2) break the isolation, which can be done by video call or group call to improve communication with family, friends or loved ones; (3) maintaining a regular rhythm, for example sleeping and waking up regularly; (4) focus on the benefits of isolation; and (5) seek professional help when the effects of stress are too invasive (Fiorillo & Gorwood, 2020).

## **CONCLUSION**

The results of the analysis of several articles show that during the COVID-19 pandemic there are various risk factors that can ultimately worsen the state of eating disorders in individuals who suffer from it and increase the risk of developing eating disorders in the general population. The COVID-19 pandemic has also led to changes in care provided to patients with eating disorders where safety procedures must be implemented and telehealth becomes an alternative approach.

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