

# Mental disorders significantly affect those aged 10 to 14 in Singapore: Lancet study

## Impact of mental distress on population health here is the highest in Asean, it finds

**Joyce Teo**  
Senior Health Correspondent

Mental disorders are the leading cause of disability and death among 10- to 14-year-olds in Singapore, while the impact of mental distress on population health here is the highest in Asean, according to a new paper published in medical journal *Lancet Public Health* on May 28.

In 2021, the prevalence of mental disorders here was estimated at 12.8 per cent among males and 11.7 per cent among females.

Altogether, 653,000 diagnoses of mental disorders were made in Singapore that year, including

among those above 70 years of age, an age group that experienced a threefold rise from 1990 in the number of cases.

Anxiety and depression, triggered in large part by the Covid-19 pandemic, were the most common disorders, affecting approximately 185,000 and 144,000 individuals, respectively, the paper said.

The paper was among four studies examining – for the first time – Asean’s public health crisis in mental disorders, cardiovascular disease, smoking and injuries.

They are part of the 2021 Global Burden of Disease (GBD) study, a large-scale effort examining health trends worldwide.

The series of papers is the first

joint research collaboration between NUS’ Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine (NUS Medicine) and the University of Washington’s Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME), which leads the GBD study.

Explaining the mental health burden on adolescents and the population here, lead author Marie Ng, an associate professor at NUS Medicine and affiliate associate professor at IHME, said the rise of social media and high academic pressure have both been linked to increased mental health issues among young people.

In addition, there are the shifts in the social fabric, including family breakdowns and social isolation, which are becoming more common in developed and Westernised societies, she said.

On the other end of the spectrum, as the population ages rap-

idly and people live longer, the number of older adults with mental disorders has also risen. “Mental and physical health are closely connected; with weakening physical health, depression is common among the elderly as Singapore’s population ages,” Prof Ng said.

The pandemic also triggered increased feelings of uncertainty, anxiety and isolation across all age groups. At the same time, however, improved public awareness and decreasing stigma have led to more people recognising symptoms and seeking help, she added.

Professor Alina Rodriguez from the psychological medicine department at NUS Medicine, a collaborator on the paper on mental health, said the data reinforces what is seen at schools. Clinically, mental health challenges often emerge early in life and, if unaddressed, can lead to years of lost potential.

Asean had an estimated 80.4 million cases of mental disorders in 2021, reflecting an increase of approximately 70 per cent since 1990, and anxiety disorders were the region’s most common mental disorder.

The actual number does not reflect the true need, as many would be borderline cases, and stigma prevents people from seeking care, said Prof Rodriguez.

Meanwhile, self-harm was the leading cause of injury deaths in Singapore, accounting for 47 per cent of all injury deaths, with the highest incidence rate seen among youth aged 20 to 24. Mental disorders are a major contributor.

More incidents of self-harm occurred among females in Singapore than males in 2021. The incidence in Singapore was lower, however, than the rates in neighbouring high-income Asian countries Japan and South Korea.

Falls were the second-leading cause of injury death after self-harm, accounting for 22 per cent of all deaths from injury here.

In the region, the largest number of injury deaths was attributed to road injuries, followed by falls, self-harm, drowning and interpersonal violence. Self-harm was among the top three leading causes of injury-related mortality in Malaysia, Thailand, Brunei and Vietnam.

As for cardiovascular diseases, Singapore had the lowest prevalence and mortality in the Asean region, and outperformed trends in global and high-income countries

in the reduction of cardiovascular disease mortality.

However, cardiovascular diseases are still a major population health issue here, given the ageing population and rising risk factors. It is the second-leading cause of death in Singapore, and the number of cases has increased by nearly 200 per cent in the last 30 years.

In 2021, more than 385,000 people in Singapore were affected by cardiovascular diseases. The top five risk factors were high blood pressure, dietary risks (for example, high sodium, low fibre, low fruit), high LDL cholesterol, high fasting plasma glucose and tobacco use. Obesity is the fastest-growing risk factor.

In Singapore, the smoking prevalence among males aged 15 and above was 20.2 per cent, significantly lower than the Asean average of 48.4 per cent.

Among females, smoking prevalence stood at 6.56 per cent, which is higher than the regional female average of 4.47 per cent, and ranked the fourth-highest in the region.

“The findings present a nuanced picture of Singapore’s health progress. While we’ve made remarkable strides in areas like cardiovascular care and tobacco control, the growing burden of mental health conditions and injuries, particularly self-harm and falls, calls for urgent and sustained attention,” said Prof Ng.

joyceteo@sph.com.sg