

# Antidepressant and anxiolytic consumption during COVID-19 pandemic

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## Introduction

Mental health includes emotional, psychological and social well-being. It affects the way of thinking, feeling and developing relationships. Increased incidence of mental health conditions have been noted in the past decade, with 13% rise reported (up to 2017) (WHO, 2019). Many factors contribute to mental health problems, including: biological factors (genes or brain chemistry) or life experiences, such as trauma or abuse. Overtime work, exhaustion and near death experience often are recognized risks to mental health among healthcare professionals. Particularly, COVID-19 pandemic has led to even higher incidence in this occurrence. As leading anxiety and depression factors during the pandemic are considered: fear of infecting ourselves or our loved ones and endanger their health, social isolation, and work from home, loneliness and financial instability.

The aim of this study was to evaluate the effect of COVID-19 pandemic on antidepressant and anxiolytic medication consumption in local pharmacy in Kumanovo.

## Materials and methods

The data for antidepressant (amitriptyline, fluoxetine, paroxetine, sertraline and venlafaxine) and anxiolytic (diazepam, bromazepam and alprazolam) medication consumption at the expense of health insurance of Republic of North Macedonia for three year i.e. 2018-2020, was collected in local pharmacy in Kumanovo. The

percentage representation for each group of drugs was calculated in relation of total number of issued drugs for each year. The obtained results were compared with the data from the annual reports on drug consumption from the Health Insurance Fond Republic of North Macedonia (HIFRNM).

## Results and discussion

From the total of patients for 2018, 2019 and 2020 percentage representation of antidepressant medications were 2.07%, 2.61%, and 2.99% for each year retrospectively. There was no statistically significant increase in the number of patients who consumed antidepressant medications in 2020. The annual reports from the HIFRNM demonstrate similar results, with the 1.95%, 2.01% and 2.04% prevalence of antidepressant use for each year. The anxiolytic consumption for those years was 7.24%, 7.56% and 8.68%, with a 1.12% increase in the number of patients receiving anxiolytic therapy in 2020. This result is confirmed by the reports from HIFRNM in which anxiolytic medication consumption was 8.66%, 8.32% and 9.35%.

Several studies were designed during SARS epidemic in 2003 (Pearson et al., 2004) and Ebola epidemic in 2014 (Shultz et al., 2016) which confirmed their impact on the mental health. According to the scientific brief released by WHO, in the first year of COVID-19 pandemic, global prevalence of anxiety and depression increased by 25 % (WHO, 2022). Consumption of antidepressant medications, although expected to increase, remains the

same due to several factors. In the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, hospitals were closed and reassigned to treat patients infected with corona virus. This led to reduced availability of psychiatrists whose visit is problematic even in normal circumstances. Mental health is taboo topic, and seeking help is often the scariest part in the process of healing. In the beginning of COVID-19 pandemic, patients had access only to their family doctors and the easiest way to get fast and short-term solution was by consuming anxiolytics. Those are some of the reasons that explain the increased number of patients receiving anxiolytic therapy. The returning of the health care system back to normal and increasing the availability of psychiatrics is expected to enlarge the consumption of antidepressants.

Increased global prevalence of anxiety and depression that is not reflected by increased number of patients receiving antidepressant therapy in RNM is indicative that the mental health of many patients is neglected. Interventions should be made to start managing mental health problems while they are at an early stage, which will contribute to easier and faster healing. Waiting and procrastination will only worsen mental health conditions and will complicate treatment. One of the problems with patients who have been to a psychiatrist and have been recommended antidepressant therapy is that they refuse to start treatment. The role of the pharmacist in the pharmacy, among others, is to advise the patient about the importance of taking antidepressant therapy regularly.

## Conclusion

The impact that the COVID-19 pandemic is going to leave on the mental health is undoubtful, thus awareness of its importance should be raised. Patients should be advised to seek help and, if necessary, to be encouraged to start antidepressant therapy. Family doctors, specialists and pharmacists should work as a team for early detection and treatment of mental conditions.

## References

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