



**CHLOE A GILKINSON**

School of Medicine, Dentistry & Biomedical Sciences, Queen's University Belfast  
Faculty of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Annual Conference 2021, Thursday 23 & Friday 24 September.

## REFERENCES

## BACKGROUND

- Adolescence is a critical period for reorganisation of brain structure, with pronounced sensitivity to environmental influences and deleterious psychological effects relating to emotional dysregulation<sup>1</sup>.
- Emotion regulation deficits underpin the development and maintenance of pathological eating<sup>2,3</sup>. Therefore, the ongoing brain maturation during adolescence renders this population susceptible to eating disorders (EDs)<sup>4</sup>.
- The coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) resulted in national lockdowns of uncertain durations where individuals were asked to isolate at home to limit viral spread<sup>5</sup>. Such drastic lifestyle changes and uncertainty have led to psychosocial and mental health implications for adolescents worldwide<sup>6</sup>.

## AIMS

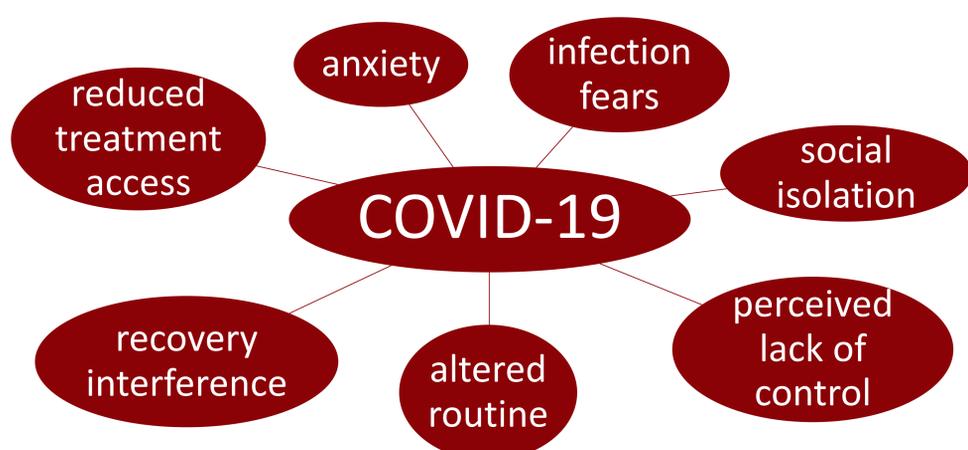
- Emerging research reports a recent surge in ED rates, likely attributable to the impacts of COVID-19<sup>7-9</sup>.
- It is vital that stakeholders and healthcare professionals are educated on how COVID-19 relates to adolescent's vulnerability to maladaptive eating behaviours as an initial step towards mobilising policy makers<sup>10</sup>.
- Understanding the impacts of COVID-19 on EDs in adolescents can inform development of effective interventions to help mitigate the ED burden.

## METHODS

- To provide a concise summary of the emerging literature, a non-systematic review was conducted to critically assess and evaluate high-quality studies exploring the effects of the pandemic on eating disorders in adolescents.

## RESULTS

- The key adverse consequences of COVID-19, as identified in the literature, include anxiety, infection fears, feeling out of control and socially isolated, changes to daily routine, recovery interference, and reduced access to psychiatric treatment<sup>11-16</sup>.
- The heightened levels of uncertainty disproportionately impacts those at risk of, or with pre-existing, EDs<sup>17,18</sup>.



**Figure 1.** The key detrimental impacts of COVID-19 on adolescents with eating disorders as identified in the emerging literature.

- Similarly, relating to the psychological distress of COVID-19, patients are at high risk of relapse into dysfunctional coping mechanisms, or of worsening symptom severity, such as heightened body dissatisfaction, increased compensatory behaviours, and exacerbated binge or emotional eating<sup>19-23</sup>.
- As a result, ED services have experienced approximately double the number of both urgent and routine adolescent referrals<sup>24,25</sup>.
- In spite of the extensive surge in clinical cases, there is a lack of empirical data and much slower rate of output of literature addressing the effects of COVID-19 on EDs due to the recency of the pandemic.

## DISCUSSION

Several limitations of the present study may limit the extent to which the findings can be generalised.

- This literature review didn't follow a systematic process. There was a great range of publications analysed, including meta-analyses, case reports and self-reported data. Therefore, due to mixed-methods, no statistical methods could be applied.
- Self-reported data may potentially be biased. For example, it cannot be excluded that the findings of symptom worsening were solely directly attributable to COVID-19.

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Recommendations for research:

- The literature remains underexplored. Further exploration of individual differences in eating behaviour changes are required.
- More longitudinal research is required to help shed light on the long-term trajectories of the COVID-19 pandemic on adolescents with EDs, and if they will remit spontaneously or need additional treatment as society enters the post-lockdown era.

Clinical implications:

- Neuroplasticity of the adolescent brain provides a target for emotion regulation interventions to prevent maladaptive eating<sup>26</sup>. There is a need for research-informed psychological prevention and early intervention efforts to be directed towards adolescents, aiming to increase psychological flexibility and resilience<sup>27-29</sup>.
- With regard to policy makers and stakeholders, public health initiatives to support eating behaviours in future lockdowns are required to prevent development of maladaptive eating habits and ED trajectories amongst adolescent populations<sup>18,30</sup>.

## CONCLUSIONS

- This study highlights that the COVID-19 pandemic has created profound social and emotional repercussions for adolescents worldwide, in particular those with a current/past ED diagnosis.
- However, ongoing research, including population data, is required to explore the detrimental impacts of COVID-19 on clinical course and outcomes of EDs in adolescents more thoroughly.
- In addition, greater funding for services, as well as new approaches to treatment, developed and evaluated through high-quality research, are necessary to meet the soaring demand on ED services.