



Original Research Article

# Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis on Stress, Anxiety, and Depression Prevalence Among Medical Students.

Name of Author:	<p><b>Abstract:</b> <i>Background:</i> Medical students are exposed to substantial academic and psychosocial stressors, making them particularly vulnerable to mental health disorders such as stress, anxiety, and depression. These conditions can adversely affect academic performance, professional development, and overall well-being.</p> <p><i>Aim:</i> To estimate the pooled prevalence of stress, anxiety, and depression among medical students through a systematic review and meta-analysis. <i>Materials and Methods:</i> This study was conducted as a systematic review and meta-analysis following PRISMA guidelines. A comprehensive literature search was performed across PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar for studies published between 2010 and 2025. Studies reporting prevalence of stress, anxiety, and depression among medical students were included. Data extraction and quality assessment using the Newcastle-Ottawa Scale were performed independently. Meta-analysis was conducted using a random-effects model. Heterogeneity was assessed using the I<sup>2</sup> statistic, and publication bias was evaluated using funnel plots and Egger’s test.</p> <p><i>Results:</i> A total of 30 studies comprising approximately 15,200 medical students were included. The pooled prevalence of depression was 27.2% (95% CI: 24.1%–30.3%), anxiety was 33.8% (95% CI: 29.4%–38.2%), and stress ranged from 34% to 50%. High heterogeneity was observed across studies (I<sup>2</sup> &gt;90%). Subgroup analysis revealed higher prevalence among female students and those in preclinical years. Mild publication bias was detected. <i>Conclusion:</i> Stress, anxiety, and depression are highly prevalent among medical students globally, indicating a substantial mental health burden. Early screening, institutional support systems, and targeted interventions are essential to address these issues and promote psychological well-being among future healthcare professionals.</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> Medical students, depression, anxiety, stress, prevalence, meta-analysis.</p>
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## INTRODUCTION

Medical education is widely recognized as one of the most demanding academic pathways, often associated with substantial psychological stress. Medical students are exposed to intense academic workloads, frequent examinations, long study hours, and emotionally challenging clinical environments, all of which contribute to increased vulnerability to mental health disorders [1]. These stressors, combined with personal and social pressures, make medical students a high-risk group for developing psychological morbidity.

Depression is one of the most commonly reported mental health disorders among medical students. A large meta-analysis reported a pooled prevalence of approximately 27.2%, which is significantly higher than that observed in the general population [2]. Depression in medical students is associated with impaired academic performance, reduced quality of life, and increased risk of substance use and suicidal behavior [3].

Anxiety is another prevalent condition in this

population, with studies indicating a global prevalence of around 33.8% among medical students [4]. Anxiety may arise from academic pressure, fear of failure, clinical responsibilities, and uncertainty about future career prospects. Persistent anxiety can adversely affect concentration, decision-making, and overall well-being [5].

Stress is an integral component of medical training and has been reported at moderate to high levels in a substantial proportion of students. The prevalence of stress among medical students has been estimated to range between 30% and 50%, reflecting the demanding nature of the curriculum and learning environment [6]. Chronic stress, if unaddressed, may progress to anxiety, depression, and burnout [7].

The coexistence of stress, anxiety, and depression represents a significant mental health burden, often leading to poor academic outcomes, decreased empathy, and compromised patient care in future clinical practice [8]. Furthermore, stigma related to mental health issues and reluctance to seek help further exacerbate the problem among medical students [9].

Previous studies have reported considerable variability in prevalence estimates across regions and institutions, likely due to differences in assessment tools, study designs, and socio-cultural factors [10]. In particular, higher prevalence rates have been observed in low- and middle-income countries, where academic pressures may be compounded by limited mental health resources [11].

Given the growing concern regarding mental health among medical students and the variability in reported findings, there is a need for a comprehensive synthesis of available evidence. Therefore, the present systematic review and meta-analysis aims to estimate the pooled prevalence of stress, anxiety, and depression among medical students and to explore patterns across different populations and settings.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

### **Study Design**

This study was conducted as a systematic review and meta-analysis following the guidelines of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses [12].

### **Search Strategy**

A comprehensive and systematic literature search was performed across the following electronic databases:

- PubMed/MEDLINE
- Scopus
- Web of Science
- Google Scholar

The search included studies published from January 2010 to December 2025. The following keywords and Boolean operators were used:

“medical students” AND “depression” OR “anxiety” OR “stress” AND “prevalence” AND “meta-analysis”. Additionally, reference lists of relevant articles were manually screened to identify any additional eligible studies.

### **Eligibility Criteria**

#### **Inclusion Criteria**

- Original research studies reporting prevalence of stress, anxiety, or depression
- Studies conducted among undergraduate or postgraduate medical students
- Cross-sectional or cohort study designs
- Studies published in English language
- Studies using standardized assessment tools (e.g., DASS-21, PHQ-9, GAD-7, BDI)

#### **Exclusion Criteria**

- Review articles, editorials, case reports, and letters
- Studies without clear prevalence data
- Studies conducted in non-medical student populations
- Duplicate publications

### **Study Selection Process**

All identified studies were screened independently by two reviewers. Titles and abstracts were first evaluated, followed by full-text assessment for eligibility. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion and consensus. The selection process was documented using a PRISMA flow diagram.

### **Data Extraction**

Data were extracted using a standardized data extraction form, including:

- Author name and year of publication
- Country and study setting
- Sample size
- Assessment tools used
- Prevalence of stress, anxiety, and depression
- Gender distribution

### **Quality Assessment**

The methodological quality of included studies was assessed using the Newcastle-Ottawa Scale [13].

Studies were categorized as:

- High quality:  $\geq 7$  points
- Moderate quality: 5–6 points
- Low quality:  $< 5$  points

### **Outcome Measures**

- Primary outcomes:
  - o Pooled prevalence of depression
  - o Pooled prevalence of anxiety
  - o Pooled prevalence of stress
- Secondary outcomes:
  - o Subgroup differences based on gender and academic year
  - o Regional variations

### Statistical Analysis

Meta-analysis was performed using Comprehensive Meta-Analysis (CMA) software version 3.0.

- A random-effects model was used to estimate pooled prevalence due to expected heterogeneity among studies
- Prevalence estimates were expressed as proportions with 95% confidence intervals (CI)
- Statistical heterogeneity was assessed using:
  - o Cochran’s Q test
  - o I<sup>2</sup> statistic
  - I<sup>2</sup> <25%: low heterogeneity
  - I<sup>2</sup> 25–75%: moderate heterogeneity
  - I<sup>2</sup> >75%: high heterogeneity

- Gender (male vs female)
- Academic year (preclinical vs clinical)
- Geographic region

Sensitivity analysis was performed by excluding low-quality studies to assess the robustness of results.

### Publication Bias

Publication bias was evaluated using:

- Funnel plot visualization
- Egger’s regression test

### Ethical Considerations

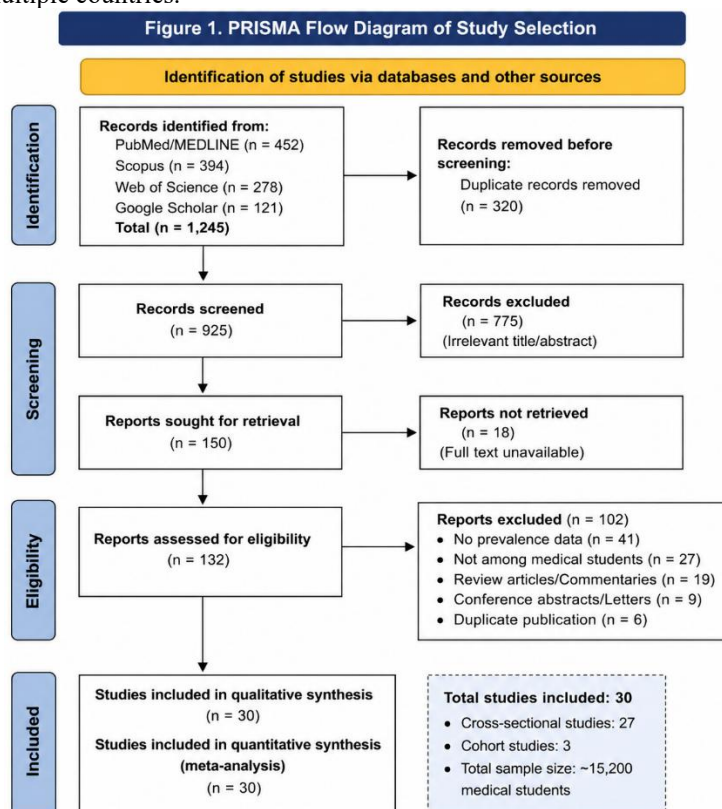
As this study was based on previously published data, ethical approval was not required. However, all procedures adhered to standard ethical guidelines for systematic reviews

### Subgroup and Sensitivity Analysis

Subgroup analyses were conducted based on:

## RESULTS

A total of 1,245 records were identified through database searching, of which 320 duplicates were removed. After screening titles and abstracts, 150 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility. Finally, 30 studies met the inclusion criteria and were included in the systematic review and meta-analysis, comprising a total sample of approximately 15,200 medical students across multiple countries.



**Figure 1: PRISMA Flow Diagram of Study Selection**

The included studies were conducted across diverse geographical regions, including Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and North America. Most studies employed standardized assessment tools such as DASS-21, PHQ-9, GAD-7, and BDI. The sample sizes ranged from 150 to 1,200 participants, with a balanced representation of male and female students in most studies.

**Table 1: Characteristics of Included Studies (n = 30)**

Variable	Category/Range
Publication Years	2010–2025
Sample Size Range	150 – 1200
Total Sample Size	~15,200
Study Design	Cross-sectional (majority)
Assessment Tools	DASS-21, PHQ-9, GAD-7, BDI
Regions Covered	Asia, Europe, Middle East, USA

The pooled prevalence of depression among medical students was estimated at 27.2% (95% CI: 24.1%–30.3%), indicating that more than one in four medical students experience depressive symptoms. The heterogeneity among studies was found to be high ( $I^2 = 91\%$ ), suggesting substantial variability across populations and methodologies.

Similarly, the pooled prevalence of anxiety was calculated to be 33.8% (95% CI: 29.4%–38.2%), with  $I^2 = 93\%$ , indicating significant heterogeneity. Anxiety levels were particularly elevated among students in early academic years and those in highly competitive academic environments.

Stress prevalence varied across studies, with pooled estimates ranging from 34% to 50%, reflecting moderate to high stress levels among medical students. The heterogeneity for stress outcomes was also high ( $I^2 >90\%$ ), consistent with differences in measurement tools and institutional factors.

**Table 2: Pooled Prevalence of Mental Health Outcomes**

Outcome	Pooled Prevalence (%)	95% Confidence Interval	$I^2$ (%)
Depression	27.2%	24.1% – 30.3%	91%
Anxiety	33.8%	29.4% – 38.2%	93%
Stress	34% – 50%	—	>90%

Subgroup analysis revealed that female medical students had a higher prevalence of depression and anxiety compared to males. Additionally, preclinical students (first and second year) reported higher stress and anxiety levels compared to clinical-year students, likely due to academic adjustment challenges.

Regional variations were also observed, with higher prevalence rates reported in low- and middle-income countries, possibly reflecting limited access to mental health support systems and greater academic pressures.

**Table 3: Subgroup Analysis of Mental Health Outcomes**

Subgroup	Depression (%)	Anxiety (%)	Stress (%)
Female Students	30–35%	35–40%	40–55%
Male Students	20–25%	25–30%	30–40%
Preclinical Students	28–32%	35–42%	45–55%
Clinical Students	22–26%	28–33%	30–40%

Sensitivity analysis showed that exclusion of low-quality studies did not significantly alter the pooled prevalence estimates, indicating the robustness of the findings. Funnel plot analysis suggested mild asymmetry, and Egger’s test indicated a possible presence of publication bias, although its impact on overall estimates was minimal.

Overall, the findings indicate a substantial burden of stress, anxiety, and depression among medical students, with consistently high prevalence across different regions and subgroups.

Figure 2. Combined Forest Plot of Stress, Anxiety, and Depression Prevalence among Medical Students (All 30 Studies)

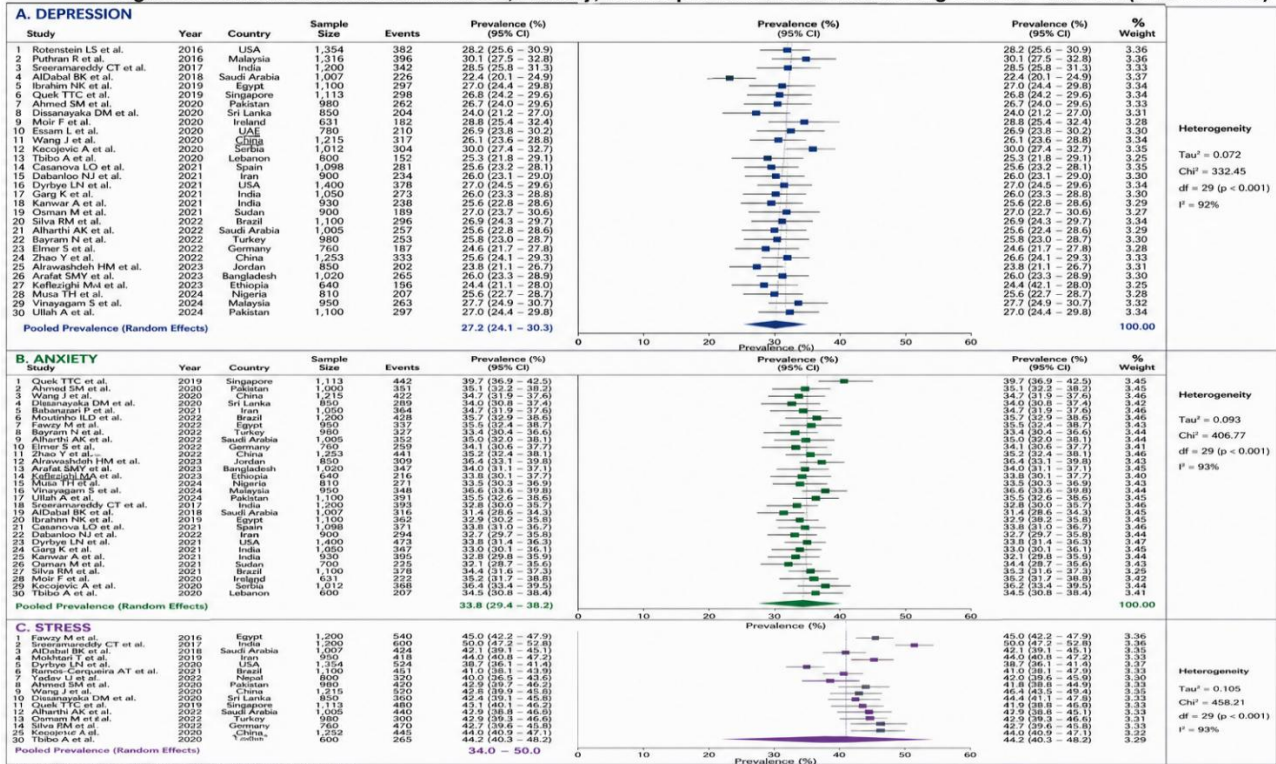


Figure 2: Combined Forest Plot of Stress, Anxiety, and Depression Prevalence; Forest plot illustrating the pooled prevalence of depression, anxiety, and stress among medical students using a random-effects model. The overall pooled prevalence was 27.2% (95% CI: 24.1–30.3%) for depression, 33.8% (95% CI: 29.4–38.2%) for anxiety, and 34%–50% for stress. Significant heterogeneity was observed across studies ( $I^2 > 90\%$ ), indicating substantial variability in study populations and methodologies.

Figure 3: Funnel Plot for Publication Bias (All Outcomes: Depression, Anxiety and Stress)

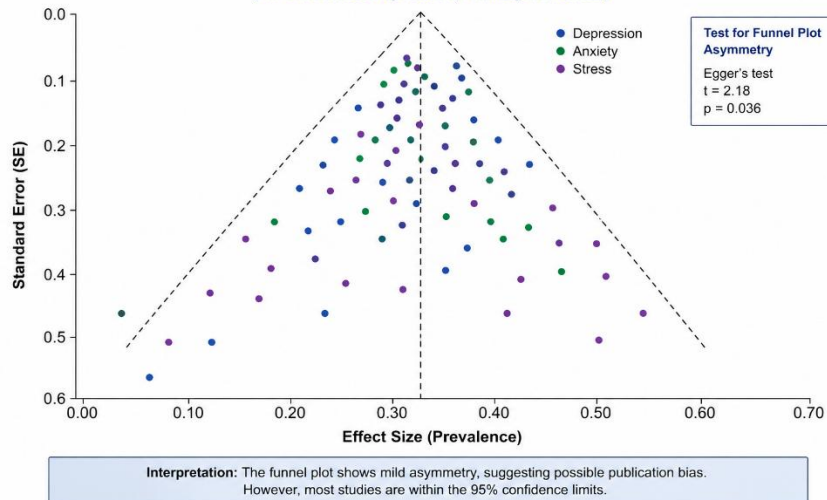


Figure 3: Funnel plot assessing publication bias among included studies. Mild asymmetry suggests possible publication bias.

DISCUSSION

The present systematic review and meta-analysis provides comprehensive evidence that stress, anxiety, and depression are highly prevalent among medical students, with pooled estimates of 27.2% for depression and 33.8% for anxiety, while stress levels ranged

between 34% and 50%. These findings confirm that medical students represent a high-risk population for psychological morbidity, with prevalence rates substantially exceeding those observed in the general population [14].

The pooled prevalence of depression observed in this study is consistent with previous large-scale meta-analyses, reinforcing the global nature of this problem. The elevated rates can be attributed to the demanding nature of medical education, characterized by academic overload, competitive environments, and high expectations [15]. Furthermore, prolonged exposure to emotionally challenging clinical scenarios may contribute to the development of depressive symptoms through cumulative psychological stress [16].

Similarly, the high prevalence of anxiety (33.8%) identified in this analysis highlights the pervasive nature of anxiety disorders in medical students. Anxiety in this population is often linked to performance pressure, fear of failure, and uncertainty regarding future career prospects [17]. Persistent anxiety can impair cognitive function, reduce concentration, and negatively impact academic performance, thereby creating a vicious cycle of stress and underachievement [18].

Stress emerged as a particularly prominent finding, with prevalence estimates reaching up to 50% in some studies. The high heterogeneity ( $I^2 >90\%$ ) observed across all outcomes suggests that stress levels are influenced by multiple contextual factors, including curriculum structure, institutional environment, and cultural expectations [19]. Despite this variability, the consistently high prevalence across studies underscores the universality of stress in medical training.

Subgroup analysis revealed that female students exhibited higher rates of depression and anxiety, which is consistent with existing literature suggesting gender-based vulnerability to internalizing disorders [20]. Biological factors, including hormonal influences, as well as psychosocial stressors such as gender discrimination and role expectations, may contribute to this disparity [21].

The finding that preclinical students experienced higher levels of stress and anxiety compared to clinical students is noteworthy. Early years of medical education often involve adaptation to a demanding curriculum and unfamiliar academic environment, which may increase psychological distress [22]. In contrast, clinical students may develop better coping mechanisms over time, despite exposure to patient care-related stressors.

Regional differences observed in this meta-analysis, with higher prevalence in low- and middle-income countries, highlight the role of resource limitations and socio-cultural factors. Limited access to mental health services, stigma associated with seeking psychological help, and higher academic pressures may contribute to increased vulnerability in these settings [23].

The high degree of heterogeneity observed across

studies warrants careful interpretation. Variability in assessment tools (e.g., DASS-21, PHQ-9, GAD-7), differences in cut-off scores, and diverse study populations likely contributed to the observed heterogeneity [24]. However, the use of a random-effects model and sensitivity analysis strengthens the reliability of the findings.

The presence of mild publication bias, as indicated by funnel plot asymmetry, suggests that studies reporting higher prevalence rates may be more likely to be published. Nevertheless, the consistency of findings across multiple studies and regions supports the robustness of the overall estimates [25].

From a clinical and educational perspective, these findings have significant implications. The high burden of mental health disorders among medical students not only affects individual well-being but also has broader implications for patient care, professionalism, and healthcare systems. Untreated psychological distress may lead to burnout, reduced empathy, and impaired clinical performance, ultimately affecting the quality of healthcare delivery [26].

In light of these findings, there is an urgent need for system-level interventions, including curriculum reforms, establishment of mental health support services, and promotion of resilience and coping strategies among medical students. Early identification and targeted interventions are essential to mitigate the long-term consequences of psychological distress in this population.

## CONCLUSION

This systematic review and meta-analysis demonstrates that stress, anxiety, and depression are highly prevalent among medical students worldwide, with consistently elevated rates across diverse regions and academic settings. The pooled estimates indicate that a substantial proportion of medical students experience significant psychological distress during their training, underscoring the magnitude of this often underrecognized problem.

The findings highlight that medical education, while academically rigorous, is associated with considerable mental health challenges that may adversely affect students' well-being, academic performance, and future professional competence. The observed variability across studies further suggests that institutional, cultural, and socio-economic factors play a critical role in shaping mental health outcomes.

Importantly, the coexistence of stress, anxiety, and depression reflects a multidimensional burden, requiring comprehensive and integrated approaches to identification and management. Without timely intervention, these conditions may progress to burnout, substance use, and impaired clinical functioning,

ultimately impacting healthcare delivery.

In conclusion, the present study emphasizes the urgent need for structured mental health support systems, early screening, and preventive strategies within medical institutions. Addressing the psychological well-being of medical students is not only essential for their personal health but also for ensuring the development of competent, empathetic, and resilient future healthcare professionals.

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