



New York

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2022;378:o2317
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.o2317>
 Published: 26 September 2022

Doctors should screen Americans under 65 for anxiety, draft guidelines say

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Americans under 65 should be screened for anxiety, according to draft guidelines published by the US Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) on 20 September.¹

The task force previously recommended screening all adults, including those who are pregnant and postpartum, for depression, and screening adolescents aged 8 to 18 for anxiety. The task force said there wasn't enough evidence to recommend for or against screening all adults for suicide risk or for screening people over 65 for anxiety.

It stressed that the recommendations only applied to people who do not have recognised signs or symptoms of anxiety or depression.

The recommendations are open for public comment until 17 October. They will then be finalised.

The task force is an independent, volunteer panel of national experts in prevention and evidence based medicine that works to improve the health of people in the US by making recommendations about clinical preventive services.

In its statement the task force said, "Anxiety and depression, and suicidal thoughts or behaviours, are mental health conditions affecting the lives of many adults in the US. There are several forms of anxiety, including generalised anxiety disorder and social anxiety, but all forms are characterised by excessive fear or worry. Depression, or major depressive disorder, is a condition that negatively affects how people feel, think, and act."

The World Health Organization reported in March that the global prevalence of anxiety and depression increased by 25% in the first year of the covid-19 pandemic. WHO director general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said, "The information we have now about the impact of covid-19 on the world's mental health is just the tip of the iceberg. This is a wake-up call to all countries to pay more attention to mental health and do a better job of supporting their populations' mental health."²

Task force member Lori Pbert, a clinical psychologist and professor at the University of Massachusetts Chan Medical School, said that screening all adults for depression "can help identify these conditions early so people can be connected to care."

The task force said that screening and follow-up care can reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression. It recognised that screening was only the first step. People who were positive on screening needed further evaluation to determine whether they had anxiety or depression. After diagnosis they should participate in shared decision making with their healthcare professional to identify the treatment or combination

of treatments that would benefit them and then be monitored to ensure the treatment was effective.

The new recommendations will be added to a lengthy list of screenings that doctors should do.

The *BMJ* asked the American College of Physicians, which has around 160 000 members, for comment on the proposed recommendation. It declined to comment.

The American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP), which has about 127 600 members, said, "Family physicians understand the critical need for integrated mental health screening and treatment in the primary care setting. The AAFP is currently reviewing the USPSTF's new and updated draft guidelines on screening for anxiety and depression, which are intended to move us toward this goal. The AAFP's Commission on the Health of the Public and Science will review the draft evidence report and recommendation language to determine what comments (if any) to submit in response. On release of the USPSTF's final recommendations, the AAFP will review them again to determine if the AAFP will support the recommendations as written or develop its own."

- 1 US Preventive Services Task Force issues draft recommendation statements on screening for anxiety, depression, and suicide risk in adults. USPSTF Bulletin. 20 September 2022. www.uspreventiveservicestaskforce.org/uspstf/sites/default/files/file/supporting_documents/depression-suicide-risk-anxiety-adults-screening-draft-rec-bulletin.pdf.
- 2 World Health Organization. Covid-19 pandemic triggers 25% increase in prevalence of anxiety and depression worldwide. 2 March 2022. www.who.int/news/item/02-03-2022-covid-19-pandemic-triggers-25-increase-in-prevalence-of-anxiety-and-depression-worldwide.