What is physician burnout?

Physician burnout is a long-term stress reaction which can include the following:

- Emotional exhaustion
- Depersonalization (i.e. lack of empathy for or negative attitudes toward patients)
- Feeling of decreased personal achievement

Burnout is a condition that affects all specialties and all practice settings.

What experts are saying about burnout

Physician burnout is an epidemic in the U.S. health care system, with nearly 63% of physicians reporting signs of burnout such as emotional exhaustion and depersonalization at least once per week.

While many factors contribute to burnout, the burnout epidemic is often associated with system inefficiencies, administrative burdens and increased regulation and technology requirements.

"While burnout manifests in individuals, it originates in systems. Burnout is not the result of a deficiency in resiliency among physicians, rather it is due to the systems in which physicians work."

—Christine Sinsky, MD, AMA vice president of professional satisfaction

Physician burnout is on the rise

The AMA’s 2022 National Burnout Benchmarking report offers data on physician burnout, stress and job satisfaction, as well as other emerging drivers.

During an AMA STEPS Forward® 2022 webinar on insights from the report, Kyra Cappelucci Ng, program manager for AMA Practice Transformation, notes that “Overall, 52% of respondents were experiencing a great deal of stress. This is also a 4% increase from our previous benchmark.” In
addition, 51% of respondents reported they were experiencing burnout—an increase compared with the previous benchmark. Burnout was highest in respondents 6-10 years post-training.

Addressing physician burnout and well-being is a core element of the AMA Recovery Plan for America’s Physicians. AMA resources offer innovative strategies to help physicians and their staff address physician burnout and thrive in the health care environment.

What causes burnout?

Physician burnout is largely attributed to organizational and systemic factors. Research has illustrated that EHRs and other administrative burdens largely contribute to physician burnout and frustration. “It’s been said that people don’t leave their jobs. They leave their bosses,” says Dr. Sinsky in a 2022 Moving Medicine video update. “But for physicians, physicians don't leave their careers. They are leaving their inbox. There’s been an exponential rise in the amount of inbox work for physicians.”

When a physician experiences burnout, this can have a significant impact on organizational productivity and morale—and diverted attention to administrative tasks can lead to a reduction in the amount of time physicians can deliver direct patient care.

What can be done to address burnout

Reducing burnout is essential to high-quality patient care and a sustainable health system. By measuring and responding to physician burnout where it exists, solutions and interventions can be identified and developed at the systems level to be able to:

- Assess underlying drivers of burnout
- Understand unique challenges to physician and care team well-being
- Reduce drivers of stress within an organization
- Proactively initiate programs (such as wellness or peer-to-peer networking) and infrastructure that support and promote well-being

For instance, offering an assessment (PDF) can help physicians and care team members feel heard by having a specific channel to express and share their concerns in an anonymous, confidential way.

Applying strategies and solutions that target distinctive needs can lead to positive changes, including:

- Improved patient satisfaction
- Better morale
- Higher quality of care
- Reduced medical errors

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Physician burnout and COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented the health care workforce with unprecedented challenges. Action steps taken by an organization before, during and after a crisis can help reduce psychosocial trauma and provide coping strategies for the workforce.

Explore other AMA resources on physician burnout

Physician well-being is influenced by both organizational and individual factors. Committed to making physician burnout a thing of the past, the AMA has studied, and is currently addressing, issues causing and fueling physician burnout to better understand the challenges physicians face.

- Saving Time Playbook
- Podcasts
  - Creating A Culture That Supports Well-Being (Apple Podcasts | Spotify)
  - Tackling Physician Burnout One Story At A Time (Apple Podcasts | Spotify)
- Toolkits
  - Establishing a Chief Wellness Officer Position
  - Chief Wellness Officer Road Map
- AMA Journal of Ethics:
  - Before Burnout: How Physicians Can Defuse Stress
  - How a Medical Orchestra Cultivates Creativity, Joy, Empathy, and Connection
  - Healing Medicine’s Future: Prioritizing Physician Trainee Mental Health
  - Physician Well-Being and Burnout
- AMA Ed Hub™:
  - Physician Burnout & Wellness CME Course
  - Professional Well-being
  - Burnout and Well-being

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