Burnout among physicians and other health professionals increased as the pandemic has dragged on, with a new study published in JAMA Health Forum™ showing that more than 60% of the over 20,000 surveyed were burned out by the end of 2021. That's up from 45% who felt that way in 2019.

What the study revealed, though, are areas that physician practices and health systems can potentially monitor and improve to possibly help physicians and other health professionals.

According to the study published in JAMA Health Forum—“Trends in clinician burnout with associated mitigating and aggravating factors during the COVID-19 pandemic”—doing these four things is likely to help reduce the number of people who feel burned out in your physician practice or health care organization.

Make doctors feel valued

When physicians felt valued, 37% reported that they felt burnt out. That was far below the 69% burnout rate among physicians who reported they didn’t feel valued.

“How to make clinicians feel valued is being actively explored, but general principles include having a receptive leadership team who listens to frontline workers and makes tangible changes based on feedback and needs and providing organizational support for work-life integration as well as clinician self-care,” wrote the study’s authors.

With only 45% of clinicians feeling valued in 2021, the benefits could be substantial for physicians and other health professionals, the study says.

Give people control over workload
Burnout occurred at lower levels among physicians and other health professionals who believed they had good control in their workload and schedules compared with those who described themselves as lacking work control: 39% versus 75%. The absolute difference was 36%.

**Get rid of the chaos**

Chaos, which refers to fast-paced and hectic work environments, is associated with higher burnout. The absolute difference in burnout between favorable—that is, less chaotic—and unfavorable environments was 30% or higher. “Understanding and managing work pace and modulating workload by giving clinicians greater control of their own schedules could mitigate stress seen during COVID surges,” the researchers wrote.

**Show that teamwork matters**

When those surveyed were experiencing good teamwork, 49% reported being burned out compared with 88% who felt that way when they reported having poor teamwork in their environment. There was an absolute difference of 39%.

“Good teamwork refers to not only team member camaraderie and a positive team culture, but also a solid team-based care workflows that allow for efficient task-sharing and minimizing nonpatient-facing tasks for clinicians” the study says.

Reducing physician burnout is a critical component of the AMA Recovery Plan for America’s Physicians.

Far too many American physicians experience burnout. That's why the AMA develops resources that prioritize well-being and highlight workflow changes so physicians can focus on what matters—patient care.

Learn about the AMA Physician Well-Being Program, which aims to raise awareness, advance knowledge and catalyze change to reduce burnout and promote joy, meaning and purpose for physicians, practices and health systems.

**Dashboard can drive focus**

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The study’s authors based their findings on responses from more than 20,000 physicians, resident physicians and nonphysician practitioners to the AMA’s Mini Z work-life 10-item survey. The medical professionals represented more than 120 AMA partner health systems from across the country.

A number of AMA experts contributed to the study: Jill O. Jin, MD, MPH, Purva Shah, Nancy Nankivil, Kyra Cappelucci, and Christine A. Sinsky, MD. Internist Mark Linzer, MD, director of the Institute for Professional Worklife at Hennepin Healthcare in Minneapolis, is the study’s lead author.

With burnout at an all-time high, the authors proposed synthesizing a set of key performance indicators (KPI) to be placed on an organizational dashboard that “could provide measurable and reliable work conditions and outcomes to guide optimizing a work environment for protection of the health care team.”

The dashboard shouldn’t overly focus on the percentage of health professionals that are burned out, but instead focus on burnout mitigators, including chaotic working conditions, work control and feeling valued.

“KPI measures could serve as an early warning system during times of stress to identify challenges and opportunities to improve the work environment,” the study says. And the cost savings for organizations could be considerable too, as annual costs are estimated at $5 billion for burnout-related physician turnover in the United States.