

INTRODUCTION

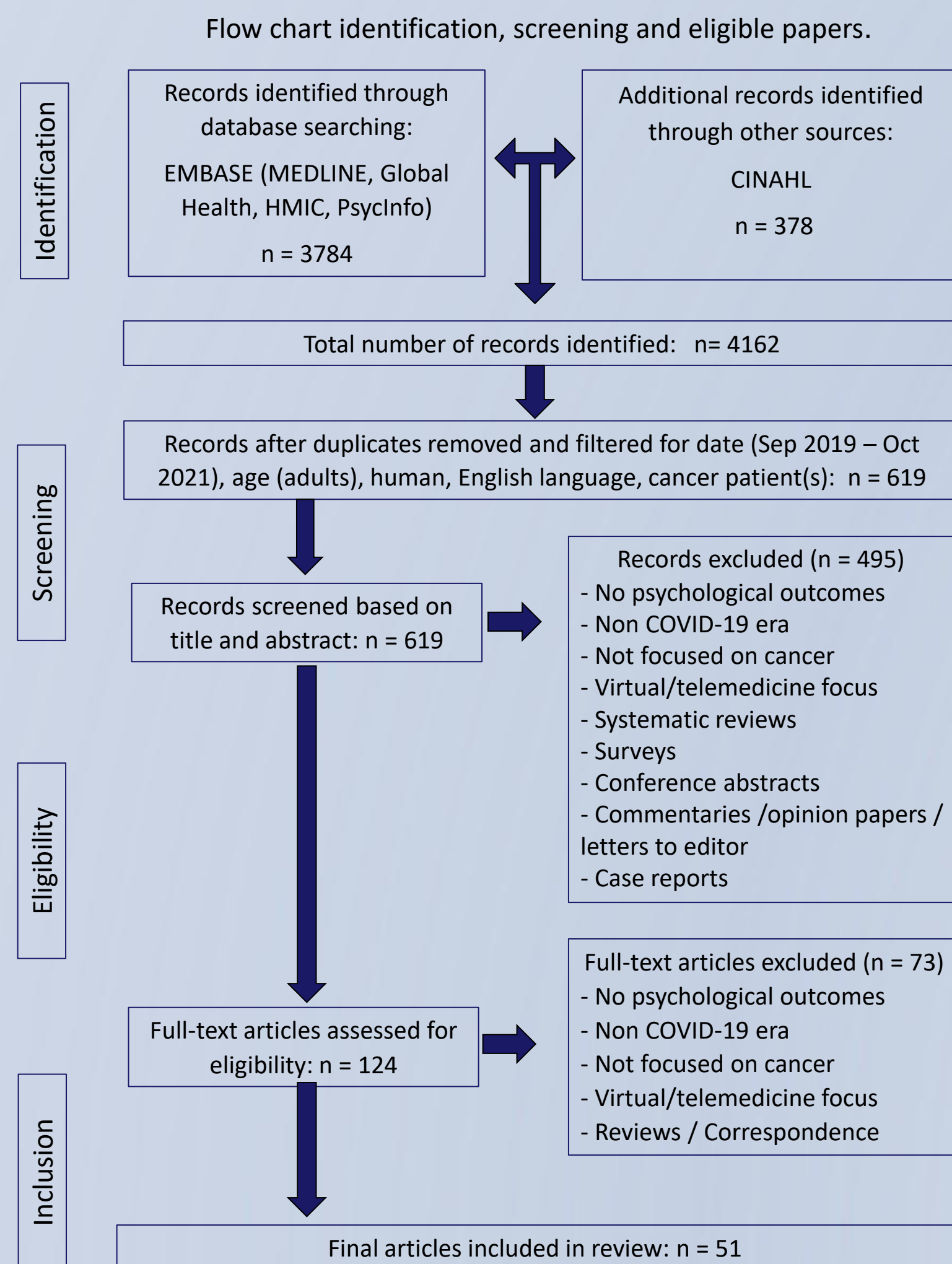
COVID-19 was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 11th, 2020. Global social lockdowns were instigated to reduce spread and prevent health-services from becoming overwhelmed. People having treatment for cancer are known to have heightened psychological/emotional burden. The combined impact of managing pandemic regulations alongside this may present additional burden. The purpose of this systematic review was to examine the psychological and emotional impact of COVID-19 on people with cancer, early in the pandemic.

METHODS

Five electronic databases were searched (Embase, Global Health, HMIC, PsychINFO, CINAHL) from September 2019-October 2021. The main search terms included COVID “AND” “OR” COVID-19 “AND” “OR” Coronavirus “AND” “OR” 2019-nCoV “AND” “OR” experience “AND” “OR” cancer.

Qualitative, quantitative and mixed-method primary research studies exploring emotional and psychological impacts of COVID-19 on cancer patients, limited to English language, were included. Quality appraisal was conducted using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT)¹.

A form of meta synthesis was used to combine the studies of the emotional and psychological experiences of cancer patients during COVID-19 pandemic into understandable concepts.² The process involved identifying key concepts from studies and translating them into one another. The term “translating” refers to the process of extracting concepts from one study and acknowledging the same concept in another study even if the concepts are expressed in different words.



RESULTS

51 papers, with 27,356 people from 21 countries treated for cancer, were included. 43 studies were quantitative with a survey method approach, 6 studies qualitative and 4 used a mixed methods design. The MMAT score was mostly two (n=15) or three (n=17) out of a maximum score of five.

A wide variety of tools were used to assess quality of life, emotional and psychological aspects. Several studies used the Generalised Anxiety Disorder scale (n = 6), the European Organisation for Research and Treatment of Cancer (EORTC) scale (n = 8) or the Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale (HADs) (n = 8) but most often Non-validated Covid Surveys (NVCS) were used (n = 27). Four themes were identified: emotional aspects and quality of life; psychosocial aspects; impact of COVID-19 on self and impact of COVID-19 on cancer.

Key concepts	Main themes	Number of papers including this theme
Anxiety	Emotional aspects and quality of life	n = 39
Depression		
Distress		
Employment	Psychosocial aspects	n = 23
Financial difficulties		
Loneliness and isolation		
Social support		
Uncertainty about the future	Impact of COVID-19 on self	n = 20
Fear and worry of getting COVID-19 infection	Impact of COVID-19 on cancer	n = 15
Vulnerability		
Fear of cancer recurrence		
Treatment delays or cancellations		

CONCLUSIONS

Whilst emotional/psychological impacts such as anxiety, isolation, employment fears, and uncertainty about the future were potentially universal concerns early in the pandemic, they may have been particularly acute for people living with cancer and represent complex, overlapping factors.

As COVID-19 is now less acute, it continues to impact health-services and society and it is important to focus on the long-term impact on the experience of cancer patients. Most of the studies reviewed used tools that do not provide deeper understanding of how and why emotional states of people with cancer were affected. Further qualitative work may reveal patterns of what was unique to cancer patients during the pandemic, compared to general populations and times of less restrictions.

REFERENCES

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- Noblit GW, Hare RD. Chapter 5: Meta-Ethnography: Synthesizing qualitative studies. In: Peter Lang AG Ed. *Counterpoints Vol. 44, Particularities: Collected Essays on Ethnography and Education*. <http://www.tor.org/stable/42975557>, 1999, p. 93-123.