

Regional update

A systematic review of anxiety prevalence in adults within primary care and community settings in Malaysia



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ABSTRACT

Background: Anxiety disorders are common mental health disorders with significant impact on the individual as well as burden on the country as a whole.

Methods: A systematic review of databases, reference lists, internet sources, and input from content experts revealed 42 studies that documented the prevalence of anxiety symptoms or disorders. 12 of these studies specifically evaluated anxiety disorders.

Results: 4 studies looked at the prevalence of anxiety disorders in the general population, whilst the remainder focused on selected population groups: university students (4 studies); substance abuse (3 studies); and victims of abuse (1 study). Studies in the general population showed that the prevalence of generalised anxiety disorder was 0.4–5.6%, mixed anxiety and depression were 3–5%, panic without agoraphobia 0.4%, phobia unspecified 0.5–1%, and anxiety not-otherwise-specified 0.3–6.5%. We found significant variability in anxiety disorders in the studies in selected population groups. The variability could also have been affected by methodological factors within each study.

Conclusion: This study provides a broad overview of the prevalence of anxiety disorders in Malaysia. More research is required to develop diagnostic instruments that are validated for local use and comparable with international standards. Reliable prevalence estimates are lacking within certain groups, e.g. those in rural, indigenous, migrant population groups and those exposed to natural disasters.

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1. Introduction

Anxiety disorders are common mental health disorders associated with a high burden of disease (Somers et al., 2006). Diagnostic categories exist, such as the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) and the International Classification of Diseases (ICD) by the World Health Organisation (WHO) (World Health Organization, n.d.). Anxiety disorders are the sixth major cause of disability worldwide, especially in high-income and middle-income countries. They are especially prevalent in females and have the highest

impact on both genders between the ages of 15 and 34 (Baxter et al., 2014). Globally, anxiety disorders affect approximately 7.3% of the population but vary depending on gender, culture, conflict, age and economic status (Baxter et al., 2013).

In Malaysia, the estimated annual economic burden of anxiety is more than 80 million USD (Manaf et al., 2009). However, evidence suggests that primary care doctors in Malaysia struggle to diagnose and manage anxiety disorders (Shahabudin et al., 1994). In addition, some studies show that mental health problems continue to be stigmatised in Malaysia (Hanafiah and Van Bortel, 2015; Yeap and Low, 2009). Whilst there is a significant body of data available regarding anxiety disorders in Malaysia, there has yet to be a coherent aggregation of the studies to identify the prevalence of anxiety disorders as a whole. The objective of this review is to provide an overview of studies on the prevalence of anxiety disorders in Malaysia.

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2. Methods

2.1. Search strategy

A systematic search was conducted to obtain data on the prevalence of different types of anxiety disorders in Malaysia. We searched PubMed and Scopus using known text words and MeSH terms pertaining to anxiety and its related disorders with “prevalence” and “Malaysia,” “Malaya,” and the names of every state in Malaysia in turn. The text words and MeSH terms used were: “anxiety disorders,” “anxiety,” “panic disorders,” “panic,” “obsessive compulsive disorder,” “OCD,” “generalized anxiety disorder,” “GAD,” “agoraphobia,” “phobic disorders,” “stress disorders,” “stress disorders, traumatic,” “post-traumatic stress disorder,” “PTSD,” “neurocirculatory asthenia.” No limitations were set on the language or year of publication. We also searched Google

Scholar with the same combination of terms for additional articles. Articles were obtained with the assistance of the university librarian. A content expert reviewed the list of articles and contributed further articles for screening. When the study had been initiated, the definition of anxiety disorders in DSM 4 included obsessive-compulsive disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder and acute stress disorder, which have since then been removed in DSM 5 ([American Psychiatric Association, 2013](#)). Hence, the study will be following the DSM 4 category of anxiety disorders ([Fig. 1](#)).

2.2. Screening

Two researchers screened the articles in two phases. During the first screening phase, two researchers independently screened the title and abstract of all articles. The researchers performed a

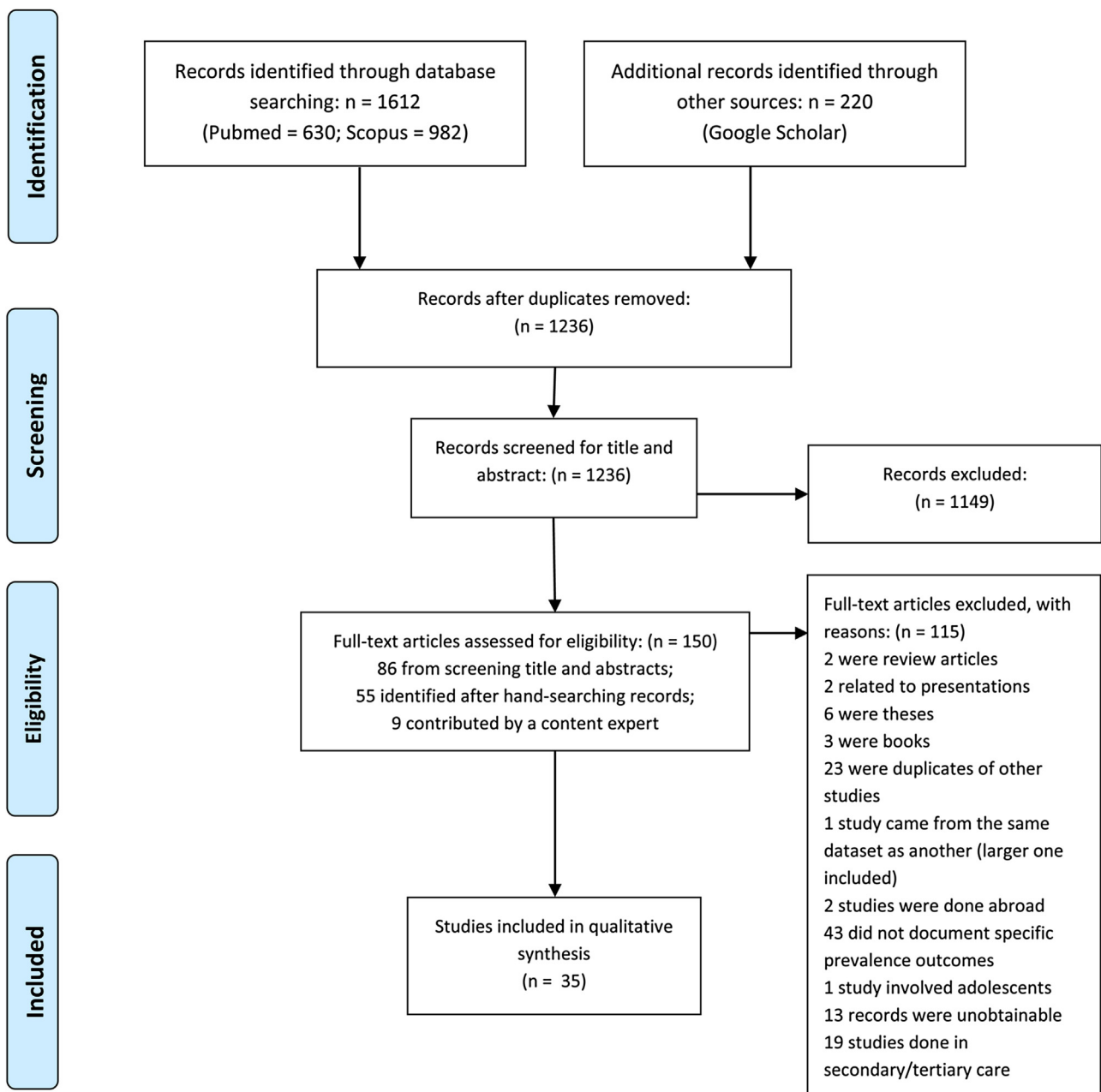


Fig. 1. Flow chart showing the process of article selection for review.

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