

## THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON FATIGUE IN PATIENTS WITH RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS

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**Introduction.** Despite all available therapeutic modalities that are successfully used in rheumatology practice which have significantly improved the treatment outcomes in patients affected by rheumatologic conditions, they still frequently suffer from fatigue. Aim: To examine the impact of COVID-19 on fatigue in patients with rheumatoid arthritis (RA).

**Participants and methods.** This prospective study included 50 female subjects aged  $\geq 30$  years diagnosed with RA, and undergoing biological therapy at the Special Hospital for Rheumatic Diseases in Novi Sad, Serbia. All respondents signed an informed consent to participate in the research and completed the Visual Analogue Fatigue Scale (VAFS) before and during the COVID-19 pandemic with the aim of assessing the association between fatigue and the categorical research variables such as age, education, employment status, type of work, marital status, smoking status, menopause duration, illness duration, laboratory findings, biological therapy, and the anatomical and functional stage of the disease according to the Steinbrocker, Rheumatoid Arthritis Quality of Life Questionnaire (RAQoL), Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS-21), Pain test, and questions related to the COVID-19 pandemic, probing into prior COVID-19 infection, vaccination, changes in the social life engagement and activity level due to the pandemic, as well as any disruptions in routine medical check-up and biological therapy attendance owing to the pandemic. Statistical processing and analyses were conducted using the SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) ver. 24 for Windows.

**Results.** While 26.0% of the respondents had a COVID-19 infection, 70.0% of the sample was vaccinated. The individuals with RA functional stage III according to the RAQoL reported a more pronounced fatigue ( $5.80 \pm 2.19$ ) compared to those in stage II ( $3.73 \pm 2.21$ ),  $p = .002$ . The fatigue level was negatively correlated with the quality of life ( $r = -.279$ ,  $p = .049$ ), while being positively correlated with depression ( $r = .392$ ,  $p = .005$ ), anxiety ( $r = .465$ ,  $p = .001$ ), stress ( $r = .414$ ,  $p = .003$ ), and pain ( $r = .588$ ,  $p = .000$ ). Before the pandemic, the VAFS score averaged  $4.700 \pm 2.468$ , declining to  $4.560 \pm 2.409$  during the pandemic.

**Conclusion.** Women diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis did not experience changes in their fatigue level during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Keywords:** rheumatoid arthritis, fatigue, COVID-19

**Conflict of interest statement:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.