Experiences of Self-Care During the COVID-19 Pandemic Among Individuals with Rheumatoid Arthritis: A Qualitative Study

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Background
- Self-care is a key component of successful chronic illness management.1 For people with rheumatoid arthritis, it can involve managing medications, being physically active, eating well and seeking medical help if a flare occurs.2,3
- The COVID-19 pandemic poses new challenges for people with rheumatoid arthritis to manage their self-care.4 These challenges may have important impacts on individuals’ self-care practices and their physical and mental health.

Methods
- A constructive, qualitative design.
- Participants purposively sampled from 2 randomized controlled trials.5,6 Eligible participants lived in British Columbia with:
  - A physician-confirmed diagnosis of rheumatoid arthritis.
  - No joint surgery in the past 6 months.
  - No history of acute injury to any joints in the past 6 months.
  - Access to an email address and daily access to a computer or mobile device.
- A semi-structured one-to-one interview (30-60 mins) by phone between March 16 – October 2, 2020; transcribed verbatim.
- An inductive, reflexive thematic analysis, with member checking and peer checking.7
- Engagement with patient partners with RA in Canada throughout the process.
- Consultations with 13 individuals with RA in UK to assess transferability of findings.

Findings

We focus on 3 themes:

1: Adapting to maintain self-care
- The [walking] trails got so busy… sometimes people are not very aware of maybe how close they stand to you. It wasn’t enjoyable. I had to look for other places, instead of my usual trail. [Marilyn]
- Because I don’t go to the office… I’m not going that two-hour commute anymore, so it’s saving me time. I’m able to go out for a walk at lunch. [Linda]
- It’s a lot easier to plan healthier meals… our diet is far better because I don’t have to make sure that my family and friends are safe. [Betty]

2: Managing emotions
While participants relayed lots of stress, also shared resilience-building strategies; keeping perspective, positive reframing, avoiding threatening thoughts, maintaining a sense of control.
- I’ve been in isolation because of chronic illness for years now… So I’m ideally trained for this… with all to worry about, COVID is no big deal. [Margaret]
- I can think about what I have done, not about what I can’t control but what I can control. [Nic]
- It’s all stressful… what I feel about it is there’s no price I wouldn’t pay to make sure that my family and friends are safe. [Betty]

3: Changing communication with health professionals
Positive experiences of remote consultation depending on pre-pandemic relationships.
- It would be more awkward with my rheumatologist… I have only seen him a few times… he’s a very brusk person. [Mary]

Conclusions
To our knowledge, this is the first qualitative study to explore the influence of the pandemic on the self-care experiences of Canadians with RA, before the first COVID-19 vaccine was approved for use in the general population. Participants’ experiences in Canada typically resonated with consultations in the UK. Insights will inform future studies to improve self-care support, strategies to optimize in-person and remote care during and after the pandemic and preparations for future public health emergencies.

References: