

# 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.<sup>1</sup> For people with rheumatoid arthritis, it can involve managing medications, being physically active, eating well and seeking medical help if a flare occurs.<sup>2,3</sup>
- The COVID-19 pandemic poses new challenges for people with rheumatoid arthritis to manage their self-care.<sup>4</sup> These challenges may have important impacts on individuals' self-care practices and their physical and mental health.

## Purpose

To better understand how the pandemic influenced self-care from the perspectives of individuals living with rheumatoid arthritis in British Columbia, Canada, within a wider international perspective.

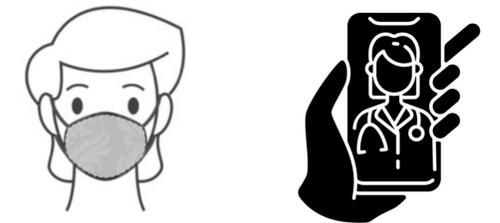
## Methods

- A constructivist, qualitative design.
- Participants purposively sampled from 2 randomized controlled trials.<sup>5,6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup>
- 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



Participant Characteristics (n=26)	
Female	23 (88%)
Age Range	27-73 years (median 54 years)
Employed (full time or part time)	14 (54%)
Bachelor Degree or Higher	18 (69%)
Lived alone	2 (8%)



### We focus on 3 themes:

#### 1: Adapting to maintain self-care

Taking self-care measures whilst preventing virus transmissions. Some self-care improved.

*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 superior. [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.

*Phone or in-person, always like to see my doctor... He's an upfront, good, communicative, friendly doctor. [Mark]*

*even outside of COVID, transportation is a challenge... it's important that you have good relationships with your doctor. Because that made all the difference during this time. [Penelope]*

*It would be more awkward with my rheumatologist... I have only seen him a few times... he's a very brisk 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.

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