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Stressful Life Events are Relation to RA Diagnosis and Presenting Characteristics: Results from the Canadian Early Arthritis Cohort (CATCH).

Objectives: Stress is known to exacerbate RA disease activity, and more recently has been implicated in the development of RA potentially through HPA-axis alterations. Although many RA patients attribute their disease onset to recent life events, results from retrospective studies offer conflicting results. We examined the prevalence of major stressful life events (+stress) in year prior to diagnosis in adults with newly diagnosed RA and compared presenting characteristics, symptoms, and function by +stress exposure.

Methods: The present study analyzed baseline data from early RA patients (symptoms <1 year) enrolled in CATCH between 2007 and 2017 with information about prior stressors. Patients were asked about major psychological (death, divorce/separation, family, financial, other) and physical (motor vehicle accident, surgery, major illness/infection, other) stressors in previous year (+stress yes/no). T-tests and chi square tests were used to compare characteristics and patient-reported outcomes between groups.

Results: The sample included 2373 adults with ERA who were mostly female (72%) and white (81%), with a mean (SD) age of 53 (15) years. The 52% of patients reporting +stress were significantly ($p < .02$) younger, better educated, with more comorbidities and longer symptom duration. Women had a 1.5 (95% CI 1.3, 1.8) greater odds than men of reporting +stress. Family and financial issues were the most common stressors. While % seropositive, mean DAS28, and fibromyalgia prevalence were similar between groups, those with +stress reported 6-20% worse fatigue, pain, disability, depressive symptoms, sleep disturbance and patient global scores ($p < 0.001$).

Conclusions: In this pan-Canadian early RA cohort, stressful life events were common in the year prior to diagnosis, especially in women. Although RA disease characteristics were similar, those with a history of +stress reported worse symptoms and function around the time of diagnosis. RA patients with significant stressors at disease onset may benefit from emotional support to optimize disease control and long-term outcomes.