

Researchers call for improved accessibility to specialist medical services during health care crises

August 14 2023



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Delays for patients awaiting a diagnosis of an inflammatory arthritis, caused by changes in practice during the COVID pandemic, could have a

negative impact on their symptoms and longer-term outlook, new research has found.

Researchers at Keele University found that referrals to musculoskeletal specialists decreased during the early stages of the COVID pandemic, partly due to other health care services being prioritized, leading to [delays](#) for patients awaiting an [arthritis](#) diagnosis. The paper is published in the journal *Rheumatology Advances in Practice*.

The researchers looked at six million anonymized health care records during three set periods; pre-pandemic (April 2017–February 2020), early pandemic (March 2020–August 2020), and late pandemic (September 2020–October 2021), to get an idea of numbers of referrals for [rheumatoid arthritis](#) (RA) and juvenile inflammatory arthritis (JIA) during this time.

They found that referrals to specialists decreased in the early pandemic and then increased again after May 2020, meaning it took longer for patients to be diagnosed with RA in the early and late pandemic periods compared with before the pandemic, particularly for residents in more [deprived areas](#).

Delays can worsen symptoms

If treatment for conditions such as RA is delayed it can lead to worse symptoms for patients and longer-term disability, so the research team have called for more to be done to ensure specialist services for diagnosing and supporting patients with possible new inflammatory arthritis remain easily accessible during future health care crises.

Lead author Dr. Claire Burton said, "The COVID pandemic understandably caused a huge shift in the way health care services were prioritized, but we're only just beginning to understand the impact this

has had on patients with longer-term conditions such as inflammatory arthritis.

"We hope that our research contributes to measuring the impact of the COVID pandemic on health care, particularly on those people with new musculoskeletal [symptoms](#) and diagnoses of inflammatory arthritis, and shows how important it is to ensure that services such as these remain accessible for patients during future times of crisis."

More information: Claire Burton et al, The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on referrals to musculoskeletal services from primary care and subsequent incidence of inflammatory rheumatic musculoskeletal disease: an observational study, *Rheumatology Advances in Practice* (2023). [DOI: 10.1093/rap/rkad044](https://doi.org/10.1093/rap/rkad044)

Provided by Keele University

Citation: Researchers call for improved accessibility to specialist medical services during health care crises (2023, August 14) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-08-accessibility-specialist-medical-health-crises.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--