

EULAR
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AN INCREASE IN GIANT CELL ARTERITIS CASES ASSOCIATED WITH PEAKS IN COVID-19 PREVALENCE

UK data shared at the 2021 EULAR congress

Giant cell arteritis (GCA) is an inflammatory disease that affects the arteries, often causing headaches, jaw pain, and vision problems. The precise cause is not known, but infection is thought to play a role. Immediately following the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of GCA diagnoses noticeably increased at the Royal National Hospital for Rheumatic Diseases in Bath, United Kingdom (UK). Furthermore, there was an increase in the proportion of patients with visual complications. The finding is important for understanding the underlying disease mechanisms in GCA, and supports the idea that viral infection could be involved. It also has implications for the provision of local services.

Ben Mulhearn and colleagues estimated the incidence of GCA seen during the COVID-19 pandemic and compared it to data from 2019, before the pandemic hit. The two distinct peaks of COVID-19 reflected by UK hospital admissions of COVID-19-positive patients allowed the authors to investigate the relationship in time between COVID-19 and GCA incidence.

At the Royal National Hospital for Rheumatic Diseases in Bath, UK, there were 61 probable or definite GCA diagnoses made in 2020 compared to 28 in 2019 – representing an excess of 33 cases in 2020, or an increase of 118%. Taking into account the fact that 41% of the hospital's catchment population is over the age of 50, this equates to an annual incidence rate of 13.7 per 100,000 in 2019 and 29.8 per 100,000 in 2020. The previously estimated regional incidence rate for South West of the UK was 21.6 per 100,000.

The significantly increased incidence of GCA may be the result of widespread infection in the local population, with SARS-CoV-2 as a driving factor. Possible mechanisms include, but are not limited to, endothelial disruption by the virus, immune system priming towards T helper cell type 1 cellular immunity, and activation of the monocyte-macrophage system. More work is underway to assess the causal relationship between the two diseases, and it may be important to monitor the number of referrals for GCA as the pandemic continues.

Source

Mulhearn B, et al. Excess giant cell arteritis cases are associated with peaks in COVID-19 prevalence. Presented at EULAR 2021; abstract OP0281.

About EULAR

EULAR is the European umbrella organisation representing scientific societies, health professional associations and organisations for people with rheumatic and musculoskeletal diseases (RMDs). EULAR aims to reduce the burden of RMDs on individuals and society and to improve the treatment, prevention and rehabilitation of RMDs. To this end, EULAR fosters excellence in education and research in the field of rheumatology. It promotes the translation of research advances into daily care and fights for the recognition of the needs of people with RMDs by the EU institutions through advocacy action.

About the EULAR European Congress of Rheumatology

Since its introduction in 2000, the annual EULAR European Congress of Rheumatology has become the primary platform for exchange of scientific and clinical information in Europe. It is also a renowned forum for interaction between medical doctors, scientists, people with arthritis/rheumatism, health professionals and representatives of the pharmaceutical industry worldwide. The EULAR congress is usually held in June in one of the major cities in Europe ([see previous congresses](#)).

The [scientific programme](#) at the congress covers a wide range of topics on clinical innovations, clinical, translational and basic science. Meetings set up by associations of people with arthritis/rheumatism, health professionals and the health care industry complement the programme. The poster sessions, offering lively interaction between presenters and participants, are regarded by many as the heart of the congress.

Over the years, the EULAR Congress has gained a reputation of being a most innovative platform for the practicing physician particularly with respect to the acquisition of information on novel clinical research. The congress attracts more than 18,000 delegates from more than 130 countries.

The aim of the EULAR European Congress of Rheumatology is to provide a forum of the highest standard for scientific, both clinical and basic, educational, and social exchange between professionals involved in rheumatology, liaising with patient organisations, in order to achieve progress in the clinical care of people with rheumatic diseases.

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