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Possible association between COVID-19-caused stress and periodontal health – a pilot study

Sanja Vujović¹, Dragan Marjanović², Momir Stevanović¹, Borivoj Bijelić³, Vladan Đorđević⁴, Danijela Staletović², Ena Joksimović³, Jana Desnica¹

¹University of Kragujevac, Faculty of Medical Sciences, Kragujevac, Serbia;

²University of Priština – Kosovska Mitrovica, Faculty of Medicine, Kosovska Mitrovica, Serbia;

³University of Belgrade, Faculty of Dental Medicine, Belgrade, Serbia;

⁴University of Travnik, Faculty of Pharmacy and Health, Travnik, Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bosnia and Herzegovina

SUMMARY

Introduction/Objective Stress is proposed as one of the risk factors linked to periodontal disease. The COVID-19 pandemic has a significant negative impact in population on mental and somatic health. This study aimed to examine the possible association between COVID-19 resultant stress and periodontal health.

Methods An observational pilot study was conducted from March 2020 to October 2021 and included 202 participants. Participants graded their stress level using the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS). Periodontal Disease Index and Clinical Attachment Level were determined. Participants were categorized into following groups: Ia (low stress), IIa (moderate stress), IIIa (high stress) and Ib (healthy parodontium), IIb (mild periodontal disease), IIIb (severe periodontal disease). The cause/effect relationship between stress and health was measured.

Results The results indicated a statistically significant difference between the groups classified according to the stress level concerning values of all the measured parameters. The Poisson regression analysis showed that in both models, crude and adjusted, periodontal health-related covariables were higher in subjects perceiving greater stress (Periodontal Disease Index – PAdjusted = 1.042, 95% CI [1.030–1.055] and Clinical Attachment Level – PAdjusted = 1.108, 95% CI [1.094–1.122]).

Conclusion During COVID-19 pandemic increased stress has a negative impact on mental health and may result in the deterioration of the entire oral cavity's health, including the periodontium.

Keywords: COVID-19; pandemic; stress; periodontal disease

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic is a global health emergency that so far affected more than 290 million people worldwide, including the 5.4 million death toll [1]. Rapid transmission has called for compulsory measures such as quarantine and community containment, which led to psychological disorders like stress, anxiety, and depression [2]. Findings of the study conducted in China showed that almost one-half of the participants deemed the impact of COVID-19 on mental health as moderate or severe, with a third of them experiencing anxiety symptoms [3]. Some studies suggest that oral conditions such as periodontal disease could be a risk factor for serious form of COVID-19, considering its mutual inflammatory pathways [4].

Periodontal disease is a multifactorial disease of the supporting tissues of the teeth [5]. It is characterized by progressive destruction of epithelial attachment and resorption of alveolar bone, resulting in luxation, migration, and, eventually, tooth loss [6]. The main etiological factor is dental plaque [7]. Clinical manifestations of the disease are determined by the nature of the immune response to microorganisms clustered in biofilm [8]. In addition

to oral plaque, the onset and progression of the disease are influenced by other local and systemic factors, such as tobacco consumption, viral infections, and diabetes mellitus [9]. However, more attention has been paid to the role of psychological determinants in this disease's pathogenesis [10].

In the course of the current pandemic, people worldwide are put under severe psychological stress whose extent to the mental and oral health is yet to be determined [2]. During stressful events, significant changes occur on biological, physiological, and behavioral levels [11]. It is hypothesized that chronic stress can alter the host's immune response, increasing the patient's susceptibility to disease and causing severe periodontal destruction [12]. Also, anxiety and fear of the unknown, extensively present during this pandemic, often lead to adopting detrimental behavioral changes that affect oral and general health [13]. Studies have shown that people under stress tend to neglect their oral health, which manifests in visiting their dentist less often, having a comfort diet, and brushing their teeth less frequently [14].

This study aims to establish whether a significant clinical correlation exists between stress levels and the severity of the manifestations of

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Correspondence to:

Vladan ĐORĐEVIĆ
University of Travnik
Faculty of Pharmacy and Health,
Polje Slavka Gavrančića 17c
72270 Travnik
Bosnia and Herzegovina
drvladandjordjevic@gmail.com

Table 1. Participants' characteristics according to the stress level

Covariables	1) Low-stress level (n = 55)	2) Moderate stress level (n = 87)	3) High-stress level (n = 60)	p
	n (%)			
Gender				
male	19 (22.4)	36 (42.4)	30 (35.3)	*0.094
female	36 (30.8)	51 (43.6)	30 (25.6)	
Age (in years)				
X ± SD; med (min-max)	28.1 ± 6.8; 26.0 (22-54)	43.3 ± 18.6; 41.0 (19-82)	56.9 ± 12.2; 60.0 (25-72)	^b 0.000* ^c (1 vs. 2) 0.000* ^c (1 vs. 3) 0.000* ^c (2 vs. 3) 0.000*
Marital status				
single	14 (30.4)	18 (39.1)	14 (30.4)	*0.137
in a relationship	21 (38.2)	21 (38.2)	13 (23.6)	
married	14 (23.7)	30 (50)	15 (25.4)	
divorced	5 (17.9)	13 (46.4)	10 (35.7)	
widowed	1 (7.1)	5 (35.7)	8 (57.1)	
Household status				
living alone	22 (56.8)	15 (31.9)	10 (31.3)	*0.006* ^a (1 vs. 2) 0.005* ^a (1 vs. 3) 0.005* ^a (2 vs. 3) 0.647
living with up to five housemates	29 (24.2)	55 (45.8)	36 (20)	
living with more than five housemates	4 (11.4)	17 (48.6)	14 (40)	
Property ownership				
owner	38 (26.6)	59 (41.3)	46 (32.2)	*0.484
tenant	17 (28.8)	28 (47.5)	14 (23.7)	
Employment				
student	26 (59.1)	18 (40.9)	0 (0)	*0.000* ^a (1 vs. 2) 0.001* ^a (1 vs. 3) 0.000* ^a (2 vs. 3) 0.000*
employed	24 (28.2)	44 (51.8)	17 (20)	
unemployed	5 (12.2)	14 (34.1)	22 (53.7)	
retired	0 (0)	11 (34.4)	21 (65.6)	
Education				
elementary school	2 (100)	0 (0)	0 (0)	*0.000* ^a (1 vs. 2) 0.011* ^a (1 vs. 3) 0.000* ^a (2 vs. 3) 0.000*
high school degree	14 (13.9)	41 (40.6)	46 (45.5)	
university degree	39 (39.4)	46 (46.5)	14 (14.1)	
Smoker				
yes	22 (24.7)	36 (40.4%)	31 (34.8)	*0.203
no	33 (29.2)	51 (45.1%)	29 (25.7)	
Body Mass Index				
underweight	0 (0)	0 (0)	4 (100)	*0.057
normal	39 (31.2)	52 (41.6)	34 (27.2)	
overweight	14 (23.7)	28 (47.5)	17 (28.8)	
obesity	2 (14.3)	7 (50)	5 (35.7)	

X – mean value; SD – standard deviation; Med – mediana; min – minimum; max – maximum; ^aχ² test; ^bKruskal-Wallis test; ^cMann-Whitney test; *statistically significant

periodontal disease during the COVID-19 pandemic, one of the potential major stressful factors.

METHODS

The study was designed as an observational clinical pilot study; it was conducted in accordance with the Helsinki Declaration. Approval was obtained from the Ethics committee of Faculty of Medical Sciences, University of Kragujevac, Kragujevac, Serbia (No. 01-2925). The study included all patients who came for a regular dental examination or intervention, starting from March 2020 to October 2021.

To estimate the sample size for the study, the following formula was used: $n = (1.96)^2 \times 4 \times SD^2/d^2$ (SD – standard

deviation of the measured loss of clinical attachment and d-the desired width of the confidence interval) and data-based on the study by Coelho et al. [15]. According to the available data, the calculated sample size was 72 patients and the researchers included 202 patients in this study.

Including factors for entering the study were that person gave written consent to participate in the study and was older than 18 years. Excluding factors were less than three teeth present, pregnancy, life-threatening conditions, uncontrolled diseases, mental disorders, and refusal of patients to participate.

Before participating in the study, the procedure and aim of the research were explained to all patients. After signing the information form and signing consent to participate in the study, all patients completed the survey, thus providing socio-epidemiological data of age, marital status, housing status, employment status, education, smoking status, body weight, and height and potential systemic diseases. After that, the patients filled the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) [16, 17], with the note of the examiner to fill the scale with special reference to the current situation, i.e., primarily considering the pandemic's impact. This scale consisted of 10 questions, each being scored from 0 to 4, depending on the answer. The score of the PSS was obtained, based on which the patients were categorized into three groups – group Ia: low stress (0–13), group IIa: moderate stress (14–26), and group IIIa: high perceived-stress (27–40).

All patients were examined by a single examiner from the Department of Periodontology and Oral Medicine. Faculty of Medical Sciences, University of Kragujevac, due to gaining objectivity and consistency of the obtained results. The doctor had all the protective equipment during the examination. The following parameters were established during the examination: Periodontal Disease Index and Clinical Attachment Level. A dental mirror and a periodontal probe (Williams probe, Hu-Friedy, Chicago, IL, USA) were used for the examination.

The Periodontal Disease Index (PDI, Ramfjord, 1959) was an instrument used to assess the entire periodontal health [18]. Numerical values 1–3 indicated the severity of gingivitis, and 4–6 indicated loss of attachment, while 0 indicated healthy periodontium [18]. The tooth's mesial and vestibular sites were examined, and the representative teeth were: first upper right molar, left upper central incisor, left

Table 2. Participants' characteristics according to the periodontal health

Covariables	1) Healthy periodontium (n = 41)	2) Mild periodontal disease (n = 83)	3) Severe periodontal disease (n = 78)	p
	n (%)			
Gender				
male	14 (16.5)	28 (32.9)	43 (50.6)	*0.012*
female	27 (23.1)	55 (47)	35 (29.9)	
* ^a (1 vs. 2) 0.964 * ^a (1 vs. 3) 0.030* * ^a (2 vs. 3) 0.006*				
Age (in years)				
X ± SD; med (min-max)	46.6 ± 19.6; 54 (19-72)	41.8 ± 17.1; 39 (20-77)	42.9 ± 18; 40 (20-82)	^b 0.348
Marital status				
single	6 (13)	15 (32.6)	25 (54.3)	*0.016*
in a relationship	9 (16.4)	23 (41.8)	23 (41.8)	
married	15 (25.4)	31 (52.5)	13 (22)	* ^a (1 vs. 3) 0.024*
divorced	6 (21.4)	9 (32.1)	13 (46.4)	
widowed	5 (35.7)	7 (35.7)	4 (28.6)	* ^a (2 vs. 3) 0.163
Household status				
living alone	7 (14.9)	13 (27.7)	27 (57.4)	*0.042*
living with up to 5 housemates	28 (23.3)	54 (45)	38 (31.7)	
living with more than 5 housemates	6 (17.1)	16 (45.7)	13 (37.1)	* ^a (1 vs. 3) 0.222* * ^a (2 vs. 3) 0.036*
Property ownership				
owner	37 (25.9)	60 (42)	46 (32.2)	*0.000*
tenant	4 (6.8)	23 (39)	32 (54.2)	
* ^a (1 vs. 2) 0.023* * ^a (1 vs. 3) 0.000* * ^a (2 vs. 3) 0.076				
Employment				
student	13 (29.5)	19 (43.2)	12 (27.3)	*0.002*
employed	16 (18.8)	42 (49.4)	27 (31.28)	
unemployed	2 (4.9)	15 (36.6)	24 (58.5)	* ^a (1 vs. 3) 0.937 * ^a (2 vs. 3) 0.021*
retired	10 (31.3)	7 (21.9)	15 (46.9)	
Education				
elementary school	2 (100)	0 (0)	0 (0)	*0.090
high school degree	19 (18.8)	43 (42.6)	39 (38.6)	
university degree	20 (20.2)	40 (40.4)	39 (39.4)	
Smoker				
yes	8 (9)	49 (55.1)	32 (36)	*0.000*
no	33 (29.2)	34 (30.1)	46 (40.7)	
* ^a (1 vs. 2) 0.000* * ^a (1 vs. 3) 0.019* * ^a (2 vs. 3) 0.023*				
Body Mass Index				
underweight	0 (0)	2 (50)	2 (50)	*0.790
normal	26 (20.8)	50 (40.4)	49 (39.2)	
overweight	12 (20.3)	24 (40.7)	23 (39)	
obesity	3 (21.4)	7 (50)	4 (28.6)	

X – mean value; SD – standard deviation; Med – mediana; min – minimum; max – maximum; * χ^2 test; ^bKruskal-Wallis test; ^aMann-Whitney test; *statistically significant

Table 3. Periodontal health-related covariables according to the stress level

Oral parameters	Low-stress level (n = 55)	Moderate stress level (n = 87)	High-stress level (n = 60)	*p
	n (%)			
PDI				
healthy	37 (63.8)	21 (36.2)	0 (0)	0.000* (1 vs. 2) 0.000* (1 vs. 3) 0.000* (2 vs. 3) 0.000*
mild	17 (31.5)	30 (55.6)	17 (11.7)	
severe	1 (1.1)	36 (40)	53 (58.9)	
CAL				
healthy	52 (58.4)	37 (41.6)	0 (0)	0.000* (1 vs. 2) 0.000* (1 vs. 3) 0.000* (2 vs. 3) 0.000*
mild	0 (0)	17 (51.5)	16 (48.5)	
severe	3 (3.8)	33 (41.3)	44 (55)	

PDI – Periodontal Disease Index; CAL – Clinical Attachment Level

upper first premolar, left lower first molar, right lower central incisor, and right lower first premolar [18]. Based on the PDI, patients were categorized into the following groups: patients with healthy periodontium (PDI = 0–3; no periodontal involvement), patients with mild periodontal disease (PDI = 4; the loss of attachment is 3 mm or less), and patients with severe periodontal disease (PDI = 5–6; the loss of attachment is more than 3 mm) [18].

Clinical Attachment Level (CAL) represented the distance from the enamel-cement border to the bottom of the periodontal sulcus/pocket [18]. Measurement of this value was performed with a Williams-graded periodontal probe (Hu-Friedy) at four points on each tooth present, the middle of the oral tooth surface, mesial, distal, and vestibular. Values were expressed in millimeters [18]. The mean values of each subject's clinical attachment levels were obtained by summing the measured values and dividing the obtained sum by the number of examined teeth and the number of examined surfaces [18]. Based on the size of the loss of clinical attachment, patients were divided into the following groups: patients with healthy periodontium (who do not have a loss of clinical attachment), patients with mild periodontal disease (loss of the clinical attachment leveled up to 3 mm) and patients with severe periodontal disease (loss of the clinical attachment higher than 3 mm) [18].

After determining all oral clinical parameters and based on the groups assigned to participants within these parameters, patients were categorized into final groups that reflected the health of the entire periodontal tissue (Group Ib: patients with healthy periodontium, Group IIB: patients with mild periodontal disease, and Group IIIB: patients with severe periodontal disease).

All data were processed in the SPSS statistical program, version 21. Descriptive methods were used for statistical data processing. Differences in values of a categorical variable among the groups were tested for significance by χ^2 test or by Fisher's exact test if assumptions for the χ^2 test were not met. The measurement of association between periodontal health covariables and stress was performed by univariate and multivariate Poisson regression analysis. In the multivariate model, socio-epidemiological variables entered the model. A p-value < 0.05 was considered to be a measure of statistical significance for all statistical tests used.

Table 4. Prevalence ratio for the association of periodontal health covariables and stress

Covariables	Periodontal Disease Index		Clinical Attachment Level	
	Crude (95% CI)	Adjusted (95% CI)	Crude (95% CI)	Adjusted (95% CI)
Stress score	1.052 (1.043–1.061)	1.042 (1.030–1.055)	1.104 (1.093–1.116)	1.108 (1.094–1.122)
Gender				
male	1.269 (1.076–1.496)	1.125 (0.942–1.345)	1.104 (0.926–1.317)	-
female	Ref.	Ref.		
Marital status				
single in a relationship	Ref. 0.769 (0.589–1.005)	Ref. 0.791 (0.592–1.055)	Ref. 1.042 (0.744–1.460)	Ref. 0.865 (0.604–1.239)
married	1.337 (1.059–1.687)	1.151 (0.901–1.471)	2.403 (1.800–3.207)	2.074 (1.548–2.778)
divorced	1.408 (1.072–1.849)	1.069 (0.799–1.431)	2.532 (1.834–3.494)	1.747 (1.257–2.429)
widowed	1.819 (1.334–2.481)	1.016 (0.923–1.325)	4.417 (3.171–6.152)	1.565 (1.101–2.224)
Household status				
living alone	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.
living with up to 5 housemates	1.218 (0.982–1.510)	0.958 (0.712–1.273)	1.820 (1.401–2.365)	1.331 (1.007–1.760)
living with more than 5 housemates	1.379 (1.061–1.794)	0.952 (0.712–1.273)	2.311 (1.714–3.115)	1.444 (1.047–1.990)
Property ownership				
owner	1.044 (0.870–1.254)	-	1.033 (0.851–1.254)	-
tenant	Ref.			
Employment				
student employed	Ref. 2.865 (2.071–3.965)	Ref. 1.720 (1.202–2.462)	N/A	N/A
unemployed	3.494 (2.483–4.917)	1.688 (1.117–2.549)		
retired	4.605 (3.275–6.473)	1.795 (1.172–2.748)		
Education				
elementary school	Ref.	-	Ref.	-
high school	3.574 (0.890–14.346)		3.443 (0.990–9.575)	
degree	2.040 (0.507–8.214)		4.834 (0.157–14.832)	
university degree				
Smoker				
yes	1.162 (0.958–1.371)	-	1.186 (0.996–1.414)	-
no	Ref.		Ref.	
Body Mass Index				
normal	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.
underweight	1.725 (1.074–2.773)	1.325 (0.779–2.253)	2.429 (1.574–3.749)	1.398 (0.870–2.246)
	1.170 (0.975–1.403)	1.101 (0.905–1.340)	1.228 (1.013–1.488)	1.222 (0.992–1.504)
overweight				
	1.123 (0.812–1.1554)	0.961 (0.672–1.374)	1.010 (0.700–1.455)	1.051 (0.710–1.554)
obesity				

RESULTS

The study included 202 participants (85 males and 117 females, aged 19–82 years; mean age 43.19 years). Analyzing the subjects in relation to the stress, a statistically significant difference was registered between the observed groups in terms of age (between all three groups), household

status (between group with low-stress level and group with moderate stress level, and between group with low-stress level and group with high-stress level), employment (between all three groups) and education (between all three groups) shown in Table 1. In terms of age, the youngest group was group with low-stress level (28.1 ± 6.8 years), while the oldest group was the group with high-stress level (56.9 ± 12.2 years) as shown in Table 1.

Similar results were registered between the groups according to the periodontal health (Table 2). A statistically significant difference was registered between the observed groups in terms of gender (between group with low-stress level and group with high-stress level, and between group with moderate stress level and group with high-stress level), marital status (between group with low-stress level and group with high-stress level), household status (between the same groups as for gender), property ownership (between group with low-stress level and group with moderate stress level, and between group with low-stress level and group with high-stress level), employment (between group with moderate stress level and group with high-stress level) and smoking status (between all three observed groups) shown in Table 2.

Table 3 represents periodontal health-related covariables in relation to the level of stress of the subjects. A statistical significance was registered between all three groups of patients according to the stress level in terms of periodontal health parameters. The participants from the healthy group experienced the lowest levels of stress, while subjects with severe form of periodontal disease, according to the measured indices, encountered the highest stress.

The results of the univariate and multivariate Poisson regression analysis with adjustment for potential confounders are shown in Table 4. The Poisson regression analysis showed that in both models, crude and adjusted, periodontal health-related covariables were higher in subjects perceiving greater stress (Table 4).

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to examine the possible impact of stress during the COVID-19 pandemic on periodontal health. Given to the study's findings, it was shown that there was a statistically significant correlation between the level of stress during the COVID-19 pandemic and the status of the health of the entire periodontium. Patients with a higher level of stress had a more severe form of

periodontal disease, in contrast to patients whose scores on the Perceived Stress Scale were lower, which was in agreement with previous studies that also researched this topic [12, 19]. Since the COVID-19 outbreak represents a major stressful event, the impact on mental health in the form of elevated levels of stress, anxiety, and depression was noted among the global population [3]. Periodontal disease is a chronic condition that shares similar pathogenesis like stress, so it could be said that the COVID-19 pandemic has an indirect impact on the periodontal overall health [20].

The study results showed that there was a statistically significant difference in the status of periodontal health between the sexes. Possible explanation for worse periodontal health in men could be due to the association of sex hormones, specifically testosterone, with periodontal disease [21]. The percentage of unemployed participants was the highest in the group with severely impaired periodontal health, and the employment variable had a statistically significant effect on periodontal health, in terms of PDI, especially in the case of unemployed subjects. However, other similar studies that were conducted before the current pandemic, did not find a significant association [22, 23]. Subjects who were single had the most severe periodontal disease, which was statistically significant and was also consistent with a previous study, performed in 2018 [15]. Nevertheless, regarding each measured periodontal disease indicator, a marital status significantly affected only the clinical attachment level. This study did also show an association between smoking status and periodontal health, confirming the results from earlier studies and the most common clinical expectations [15, 22, 23].

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CONCLUSION

Having in mind all the obtained results of this research, etiological factors and pathogenesis of periodontal disease, multifactorial and various variables considered in this study, and above all, the current global situation, it may be concluded that the increased stress during the COVID-19 pandemic may result in deterioration of the entire oral cavity's health, including the periodontium. However, more studies are necessary to further investigate this relationship and its' long-term implications.

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Могућа повезаност стреса изазваног пандемијом ковида 19 и пародонталног здравља – пилот-студија

Сања Вујовић¹, Драган Марјановић², Момир Стевановић¹, Боривоје Бијелић³, Владан Ђорђевић⁴, Данијела Сталетовић², Ена Јоксимовић³, Јана Десница¹

¹Универзитет у Крагујевцу, Факултет медицинских наука, Крагујевац, Србија;

²Универзитет у Приштини – Косовска Митровица, Медицински факултет, Косовска Митровица, Србија;

³Универзитет у Београду, Стоматолошки факултет, Београд, Србија;

⁴Универзитет у Травнику, Фармацеутско-здравствени факултет, Травник, Федерација Босне и Херцеговине, Босна и Херцеговина

САЖЕТАК

Увод/Циљ Стрес се наводи као један од фактора ризика повезаних са пародонталним здрављем. Пандемија ковида 19 има значајан негативан утицај на ментално и телесно здравље популације.

Циљ овог истраживања био је да се испита могућа повезаност између стреса изазваног пандемијом ковида 19 и пародонталног здравља.

Методе Опсервационо пилот-истраживање спроведено је од марта 2020. до октобра 2021. године и обухватило је 202 испитаника. Испитаници су оцењивали свој ниво стреса користећи српску верзију упитника Скала перципираног стреса. Индекс пародонталног обољења, индекс крварења гингиве и ниво припојног епитела одређивани су клиничким прегледом. Испитаници су подељени у следеће групе: Ia (низак ниво стреса), IIa (умерен ниво стреса), IIIa (висок ниво стреса), Ib (здрав пародонцијум), IIb (умерена форма

обољења) и IIIb (тешка форма обољења). Процењивана је узрочно-последична веза између стреса и пародонталног здравља.

Резултати Резултати указују на статистички значајну разлику између испитиваних група на основу стреса у свим посматраним параметрима. Поасонова регресија је у оба модела показала да су варијабле повезане са пародонталним здрављем биле више код испитаника код којих је регистрован виши ниво стреса (индекс пародонталног обољења – $PR_{adjusted} = 1,042$, 95% CI [1,030–1,055] и ниво припојног епитела – $PR_{adjusted} = 1,108$, 95% CI [1,094–1,122]).

Закључак Појачан стрес током пандемије ковида 19 негативно утиче на ментално здравље и може довести до погоршања здравља целе усне дупље, укључујући и пародонцијум.

Кључне речи: ковид 19; пандемија; стрес; пародонтитис