

Patients' experiences of health in early rheumatoid arthritis – A qualitative study

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Conclusions

Patients in an early stage of RA describe a strong desire to regain health in terms of well-being, independence, life satisfaction and vitality

Health professionals need to pay attention to these different ways of experiencing health when providing person-centred care to patients with early RA



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Background

The World Health Organization defines health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity". Health changes dramatically when a person becomes ill in a chronic disease such as rheumatoid arthritis (RA). RA is a disease with great impact on all aspects of life and affects patients' health including physical, emotional, psychological and social aspects.

Aim

To describe patients' experiences of health in early RA.

Methods

- A descriptive design with an inductive qualitative approach.
- Individual interviews were conducted in 24 patients with early RA, disease duration less than 12 months, treated with DMARDs (Table 1).
- A manifest qualitative content analysis was used to analyze the question: "What does health mean to you?"

Table 1. Socio-demographic and clinical characteristics of the patients (N=24) with early RA.

Charateristics	Patients (n=24)
Gender Women/Men	16/8
Age median (range)	56 (38-80)
Civil status	
Living alone/Co-habiting	5/15
Education	
Primary/Secondary/Third level	3/14/7
Employment	
Employed/Student	6/1
Unemployed/Sick leave/ Retired	3/6/8
VAS Pain (mm)* median (range)	29 (0-70)
VAS Global health (mm)* median (range)	26 (0-50)
VAS Fatigue (mm)* median (range)	20 (0-95)

* VAS scale 0-100 best to worse

Results

In the early stage of RA, patients experienced health as the most important goal in their life and four categories emerged (Table 2).

Table 2. Overview of categories and subcategories of the qualitative content analysis with patients' experiences of health in early RA

Categories	Health as well-being	Health as independence	Health as life satisfaction	Health as vitality
	To feel good	To perform activities	To feel joy in life	To have energy
Sub-categories	To be painless	To exercise	To enjoy family	To have power
	To feel rested	To travel	To believe in future	To cope with life

The patients expressed that their health had been adversely affected by the RA disease and they had a strong desire for full health including well-being, independence, life satisfaction and vitality.

Discussion

The concept of health at early RA is similar to health at established RA¹ in terms of well-being, independence and life satisfaction.

Unique findings for patients with early RA are the description of health as vitality, and the emphasis of having energy, power and strength to cope with everyday life.

Reference

1. Fagerlind et al. Patients' understanding of the concepts of health and quality of life. Patient Educ Couns 2010;78:104-110.

