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First of its Kind Study Finds Treatment Effective for Rheumatoid Arthritis Patients

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DENVER — For the first time, researchers have shown that a class of anti-fibrotic drugs slows the progression of interstitial lung disease (ILD) in patients with rheumatoid arthritis (RA). Research conducted, in part, at National Jewish Health showed that pirfenidone was safe and effective in these patients. The study published earlier this month in the journal *The Lancet Respiratory Medicine* is the first prospective treatment trial of patients with RA-ILD.

“ILD is a relatively common complication in people with RA and can progress and lead to premature death in up to 10% of these patients,” said Joshua Solomon, MD, director of the Interstitial Lung Disease Program at National Jewish Health and first author of the study. “This research is a big step forward for patients suffering from RA-ILD.”

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is one of the most common autoimmune diseases in the world. The treatment for Rheumatoid Arthritis and Interstitial Lung Disease 1 (TRIAL1) was a randomized, double blind, placebo-controlled phase 2 trial done in 34 academic centers specializing in ILD across four countries. Patients with RA-ILD were treated for 52 weeks with either pirfenidone, an anti-scarring medication, or a placebo. The COVID-19 pandemic prevented trial participant enrollment goals from being reached, but the results showed that pirfenidone was safe, well tolerated and slowed down the rate of progression of lung fibrosis over a year. This was the first and only prospective multi-centered international interventional treatment trial focused on RA-ILD. While the trial was foreshortened because of recruitment challenges during the pandemic, the intervention appeared safe and in context, slowed the rate of forced vital capacity (FVC) decline; as FVC decline is associated with early mortality, slowing the decline may be associated with longer life.

“With this study, we are demonstrating that anti-fibrotics as a class of medications have a reproducible effect in reducing the rate of disease progression when measured by force vital capacity,” said Dr. Ivan Rosas, corresponding author of the paper, and professor of medicine and section chief of pulmonary, critical care and sleep medicine at Baylor College of Medicine. “This could have an impact on the overall survival of these patients.”

National Jewish Health is the leading respiratory hospital in the nation. Founded 123 years ago as a nonprofit hospital, National Jewish Health today is the only facility in the world dedicated exclusively to groundbreaking medical research and treatment of patients with respiratory, cardiac, immune and related disorders. Patients and families come to National Jewish Health from around the world to receive cutting-edge, comprehensive, coordinated care. To learn more, visit the media resources page.

Media Contacts

Our team is available to arrange interviews, discuss events and story ideas.

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