Two-dose COVID-19 vaccination and possible arthritis flare among patients with rheumatoid arthritis in Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

Objectives To investigate the relationship between COVID-19 full vaccination (two completed doses) and possible arthritis flare.

Methods Patients with rheumatoid arthritis (RA) were identified from population-based electronic medical records with vaccination linkage and categorised into BNT162b2 (mRNA vaccine), CoronaVac (inactive virus vaccine) and non-vaccinated groups. The risk of possible arthritis flare after vaccination was compared using a propensity-weighted cohort study design. We defined possible arthritis flare as hospitalisation and outpatient consultation related to RA or reactive arthritis, based on diagnosis records during the episode. Weekly prescriptions of rheumatic drugs since the launch of COVID-19 vaccination programme were compared to complement the findings from a diagnosis-based analysis.

Results Among 5493 patients with RA (BNT162b2: 653; CoronaVac: 671; non-vaccinated: 4169), propensity-scored weighted Poisson regression showed no significant association between arthritis flare and COVID-19 vaccination (BNT162b2: adjusted incidence rate ratio 0.86, 95% Confidence Interval 0.73 to 1.01; CoronaVac: 0.87 (0.74 to 1.02)). The distribution of weekly rheumatic drug prescriptions showed no significant differences among the three groups since the launch of the mass vaccination programme (all p values >0.1 from Kruskal-Wallis test).

Conclusions Current evidence does not support that full vaccination of mRNA or inactivated virus COVID-19 vaccines is associated with possible arthritis flare.

INTRODUCTION

Vaccine is an effective public health measure to control the global COVID-19 pandemic. Patients with rheumatoid arthritis (RA) are twofold more vulnerable to infections that result in hospitalisation and impaired quality of life.1 With consideration to the benefits of vaccination outweighing the risks, the European Association of Associations for Rheumatology (EULAR)2 recommends that patients with RA should receive COVID-19 vaccines without needing major adjustment to their ongoing treatment regimens.

However, one of the major barriers to vaccine uptake among patients with RA is the fear of arthritis flare despite non-relevant evidence from landmark trials and few case reports in the post-marketing.3

Understanding the association between arthritis flare and vaccination is important to overcome vaccine hesitancy. Currently, the Hong Kong (HK) Government Vaccination Programme provides two authorised COVID-19 vaccines: CoronaVac (inactivated virus vaccine; recommended vaccination interval 28 days) and BNT162b2 (mRNA vaccine; recommended vaccination interval 21 days). Since the launch of the vaccination programme on 23 February 2021, more than 8 million doses have been administered with close safety monitoring. In this study, we analysed the territory-wide electronic medical records (EMRs) database and aimed to investigate the population-level risk of possible arthritis flare.
arthritis flare following full vaccination based on two technology platforms.

METHOD

Data sources
We analysed population-based EMRs from the Hospital Authority (HA) with linked vaccination records from the Department of Health (DH) of the HK Government. HA provides publicly funded health services to around 7 million HK residents. The EMRs database managed by the HA holds centralised medical records from 42 public hospitals with high population coverage, representativeness and coding accuracy. This study linked the EMRs with the vaccination records of all HK residents ≥16 years old who ever used the HA service. We used de-identified and non-reversible series numbers for the record linkage to protect patient privacy.

Study design and population
This was a retrospective cohort study among patients with RA. Risk of possible arthritis flare was compared among vaccine recipients and non-vaccinated individuals. Based on the International Classification of Diseases Ninth version, Clinical Modification (ICD-9-CM) diagnosis (online supplemental table 1), we identified the RA cohort from the EMRs, excluding patients who had cancer or other autoimmune diseases to avoid cohort contamination. We matched each vaccine recipient with non-vaccinated individuals by age and sex using maximum ratio matching and assigned the vaccination date as the pseudo index date for non-vaccinated individuals (controls). Individuals with completed two-dose vaccination and their matched controls were followed up from the date of second dose vaccination or the age-sex matched pseudo index date until the occurrence of interested outcome, death or the end date of data availability (31 July 2021), whichever was earlier. The record linkage, matching procedure and cohort identification is illustrated in online supplemental figure 1.

Outcome measurements
After vaccination, any specialist outpatient clinic (SOPC) consultation or hospitalisation related to RA or reactive arthritis was considered a proxy of arthritis flare. Primary outcome is a recorded diagnosis of RA or reactive arthritis from inpatient or SOPC settings. Secondary outcome is a relevant diagnosis at inpatient setting as the proxy of severe arthritis flare.

Statistical analysis
To balance the patient characteristics among groups (CoronaVac, BNT162b2 and non-vaccinated), we used multi-group Inverse Probability Treatment Weighting method and weighted variables including age, sex, medical history and health service utilisation since 2018 and the recent 90 days of medication use. We applied Poisson regression to estimate the adjusted incidence rate ratio (IRR) with 95% Confidence Interval (CI) using the non-vaccination group as reference. Fisher’s exact test was used to examine the association between delayed second dose (defined as interdose interval more than 42 days, which is the maximum dose interval used in BNT162b2 clinical trials) and the occurrence of flare.

In addition, we analysed the weekly prescription pattern of rheumatoid drugs (online supplemental table 2) between 23 February (the start date of mass vaccination programme) and 31 July 2021, hypothesising that the prescription volume of non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) and corticosteroids would increase sharply if there was a significant arthritis flare in the study cohort. Number of prescriptions (per-patient) and proportion of each drug category (NSAIDs, corticosteroids, conventional synthetic disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs (csDMARDs) and biological/target synthetic disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs (b/tsDMARDs)) among CoronaVac, BNT162b2 and non-vaccinated groups were compared using Kruskal-Wallis test.

Patient and public involvement
This study used de-identified electronic medical records and was conducted without patient and public involvement.

RESULTS
We obtained 3983,529 records of HA active patients with affirmed vaccination status. Following the cohort selection procedure, 5493 patients with RA (BNT162b2: 653; CoronaVac: 671 and non-vaccinated individuals: 4169) were included. Compared with non-vaccinated individuals, vaccine recipients were younger and less likely to have pre-existing chronic diseases. After weighting, all variables were well balanced with a standardised mean difference smaller than 0.2 (table 1). Median interdose interval was 21 days (IQR 21–23) for BNT162b2 and 28 days (IQR 28–29) for CoronaVac recipients. Delaying the second dose was very uncommon for both vaccine groups (BNT162b2: 0.5%; CoronaVac: 0.8%).

During a median follow-up of 32 days (IQR 14–72), 35 BNT162b2 recipients (crude incidence 0.45 (95% CI 0.32 to 0.62) per person-year) had RA or reactive arthritis-related hospitalisation or SOPC attendance. The number of CoronaVac recipients was 41 (crude incidence 0.45 (0.33 to 0.61) per person-year) with a median follow-up of 30 days (IQR 15–95). Receiving two doses of BNT162b2 (adjusted IRR 0.86 (95% CI 0.73 to 1.01)) or CoronaVac (adjusted IRR 0.87 (95% CI 0.74 to 1.02)) showed no significant association with arthritis flare as defined. Similarly, no significant association was detected when focusing on events identified from inpatient setting only (table 2). Delayed second dose was not associated with the occurrence of possible flare (p=0.3042 for BNT162b2; p=0.5422 for CoronaVac and p=0.1454 for overall from Fisher’s exact test).

Weekly prescription of four major rheumatoid drugs were presented in figure 1. Since the launch of the COVID-19 vaccination programme in HK, weekly arthritis-related prescriptions ranged between 0.09 and 0.14 per patient. NSAIDs and corticosteroids accounted for 23%–27% of overall prescriptions. The per-patient prescription and distribution of four rheumatoid drug categories showed no significant differences among the BNT162b2 and CoronaVac recipients, and the non-vaccinated individuals (all p values >0.1 from Kruskal-Wallis test).

DISCUSSION
Using territory-wide EMRs in HK, we found that after full vaccination with BNT162b2 or CoronaVac, patients with RA did not show an increased risk of possible arthritis flare. The weekly prescription trends of major rheumatoid drugs also presented no significant differences among patients with or without vaccination. Currently, safety evidence on COVID-19 vaccine among patients with rheumatic diseases are from case reports, self-report surveys or trials among RA patients with controlled disease activities. Since the launch of vaccination in HK, uptake of the vaccine (approximate 24% (95% CI 22.99% to 25.25%) with full vaccination based on our study cohort) among patients with RA is gradually increasing (online}


supplemental figure 2), although remaining suboptimal. Findings from this study provide real-world evidence of COVID-19 vaccine safety and could potentially overcome vaccine hesitancy among patients with RA.

We acknowledge that if individuals who experienced flare after the first dose, then they would be less likely to take the second dose, which could theoretically introduce biased estimation for the current two-dose analysis. To clarify this issue, we conducted post hoc analysis to estimate the number of patients received single-dose only. We included patients who received the first-dose vaccine on or before 19 June 2021 and had no record of second dose until the study end date (31 July 2021). It would ensure at least 42-day observation period after the first dose and exclude the possibility that the second dose was scheduled beyond the study period. Although the recommended dosing interval is 21 and 28 days for BNT162b2 and CoronaVac, respectively, the HK Government allows flexibility of interval between doses for logistic or clinical reasons. Analysis of the phase III efficacy data of BNT162b2 showed it was feasible to administer the second dose from 19 to 42 days. Therefore, we defined

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Baseline characteristics before and after multi-group inverse probability treatment weighting</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Before weighting</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BNT162b2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>653</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male (N (%))</td>
<td>136 (20.8)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age (mean (SD))</td>
<td>55.83 (11.89)</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**Comorbidities (N (%))**
- Asthma: 9 (1.4), 9 (1.3), 72 (1.7), 0.021, 53.6 (1.4), 55.7 (1.4), 72.0 (1.7), 0.019
- Cerebrovascular disease: 6 (0.9), 18 (2.7), 230 (5.5), 0.18, 163.9 (4.2), 166.0 (4.1), 230.0 (5.5), 0.044
- Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease: 12 (1.8), 16 (2.4), 235 (5.6), 0.135, 218.7 (5.6), 264.4 (6.5), 235.0 (5.6), 0.025
- Congestive heart failure: 1 (0.2), 2 (0.3), 118 (2.8), 0.153, 120.5 (3.1), 50.7 (1.3), 118.0 (2.8), 0.085
- Chronic renal failure: 0 (0.0), 5 (0.0), 76 (1.8), 0.137, 0.0 (0.0), 72.9 (1.8), 76.0 (1.8), 0.129
- Dementia: 0 (0.0), 0 (0.0), 17 (0.4), 0.16, 0.0 (0.0), 0.0 (0.0), 17.0 (0.4), 0.06
- Diabetes: 29 (4.4), 45 (6.7), 488 (11.7), 0.18, 503.8 (12.9), 384.3 (9.5), 488.0 (11.7), 0.073
- Mild liver disease: 0 (0.0), 1 (0.1), 13 (0.3), 0.056, 0.0 (0.0), 3.8 (0.1), 13.0 (0.3), 0.057
- Moderate-severe liver disease: 1 (0.2), 0 (0.0), 1 (0.0), 0.04, 0.0 (0.0), 0.0 (0.0), 1.0 (0.0), 0.015
- Myocardial infarction: 4 (0.6), 4 (0.6), 34 (0.8), 0.07, 25.8 (0.7), 82.8 (2.0), 34.0 (0.8), 0.04
- Peripheral vascular disease: 0 (0.0), 0 (0.0), 39 (0.9), 0.1, 0.0 (0.0), 27.7 (0.7), 39.0 (0.9), 0.094
- Paralysis: 0 (0.0), 0 (0.0), 17 (0.4), 0.065, 0.0 (0.0), 7.6 (0.2), 17.0 (0.4), 0.064
- Respiratory infections: 20 (3.1), 23 (3.4), 390 (9.4), 0.176, 278.5 (7.2), 354.8 (8.8), 390.0 (9.4), 0.053
- Stroke or systemic embolism: 2 (0.3), 7 (1.0), 95 (2.3), 0.121, 73.5 (1.9), 56.4 (1.4), 95.0 (2.3), 0.044
- Ulcers: 3 (0.5), 14 (2.1), 106 (2.5), 0.116, 80.1 (2.1), 97.7 (2.4), 106.0 (2.5), 0.022
- Viral infections: 0 (0.0), 2 (0.3), 43 (1.0), 0.104, 0.0 (0.0), 36.9 (0.9), 43.0 (1.0), 0.097

**Health service utilisation (N (%))**
- Emergency or hospital admission: 471 (72.1), 508 (75.7), 3464 (83.1), 0.177, 3185.5 (81.8), 3327.5 (82.1), 3464.0 (83.1), 0.022
- Outpatient visits: 641 (98.2), 665 (99.1), 4122 (98.9), 0.054, 3826.2 (98.3), 4011.8 (99.0), 4122.0 (98.9), 0.043

**Medication usage within 90 days (N (%))**
- Immunosuppressants: 11 (1.7), 11 (1.7), 134 (3.2), 0.102, 82.0 (2.1), 115.4 (2.8), 134.0 (3.2), 0.046
- NSAIDs: 284 (43.5), 295 (44.0), 1617 (38.8), 0.07, 1529.5 (39.3), 1671.0 (41.2), 1617.0 (38.8), 0.033
- Corticosteroids: 0 (0.0), 0 (0.0), 1 (0.0), 0.015, 0.0 (0.0), 0.0 (0.0), 1.0 (0.0), 0.015
- bDMARDs: 191 (29.2), 187 (27.9), 1287 (30.9), 0.044, 1230.7 (31.6), 1418.6 (35.0), 1287.0 (30.9), 0.059
- csDMARDs: 486 (74.4), 508 (75.7), 3041 (72.9), 0.042, 2767.6 (71.1), 2988.2 (73.7), 3041.0 (72.9), 0.04
- Drugs for gout: 9 (1.4), 26 (3.9), 120 (2.9), 0.105, 79.7 (2.0), 93.1 (2.3), 120.0 (2.9), 0.036

**Table 2** Risk of flare among two-dose vaccine recipients vs unvaccinated individuals, after propensity score weighting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N</th>
<th>Follow-up time (person-year)</th>
<th>Crude incidence (per person-year, 95% CI)</th>
<th>Adjusted IRR* (95% CI)</th>
<th>P-value</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary outcome</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>BNT162b2</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>78.23</td>
<td>0.45 (0.32 to 0.62)</td>
<td>0.86 (0.73 to 1.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CoronaVac</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>91.02</td>
<td>0.45 (0.33 to 0.61)</td>
<td>0.87 (0.74 to 1.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>330</td>
<td>612.63</td>
<td>0.54 (0.48 to 0.60)</td>
<td>Ref –</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Secondary outcome |
| BNT162b2 | 33   | 78.65 | 0.42 (0.29 to 0.58) | 0.96 (0.81 to 1.14) | 0.6486 |
| CoronaVac | 38   | 91.58 | 0.41 (0.30 to 0.56) | 1.03 (0.87 to 1.22) | 0.7373 |

*Adjusted variables with standard mean difference >0.1; IRR estimated using non-vaccinated group as reference. IRR, incidence rate ratio.
registered death, indicating a satisfactory prognosis. 

For possible flare resulting in hospitalisation, our data showed appropriate regimen and dosing adjustment of DMARDs is followed. Fisher’s exact test also showed no association between delayed second dose more than 42 days after the first dose. However, as disease activity assessment (eg, Disease Activity Score-28 for Rheumatoid Arthritis) and patient-reported symptoms (eg, pain, stiffness and fever), is not available. Using arthritis-related hospital admission and SOPC consultation as a proxy of flare may underestimate the accurate occurrence. The supplementary analysis using arthritis-related prescription as a surrogate outcome of flare enables the validation of diagnosis-based outcome definition. This consistent finding further supports the non-significant association between COVID-19 vaccination and arthritis flare. Of note, almost no patients were recorded as using corticosteroids at cohort entry, indicating that those who received the vaccine were at the maintenance stage of RA with stable disease activity or in remission. The study conclusion is not entirely generalisable to patients with active RA. Our database is also restricted to patients who use the HA service. HA is the statutory body responsible for managing all the public hospitals in HK and provides a highly subsidised health service to all eligible HK residents. It is anticipated that the majority of possible flare is captured in this study, particularly severe cases resulting in hospitalisation, although we possibly missed patients consulting private rheumatologists for flare management. However, there is no evidence to show differential use of private consultants between vaccinated and unvaccinated subjects; hence, it is unlikely to affect our conclusion.

In conclusion, among patients with RA, there is no increased risk of possible flare following two doses of COVID-19 vaccination. Real-world vaccine safety surveillance with direct disease activity testing related to arthritis flare should continue to provide more robust evidence on the association.

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**Rheumatoid arthritis**

Figure 1 Weekly arthritis-related prescriptions among vaccine recipients and non-vaccinated individuals, between 1 February and 31 July 2021. BTDMARDs, biological or target synthetic disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs; CSDMARDs, conventional synthetic disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs; NSAID, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug. Kruskal-Wallis test showed all p values >0.1 for each week comparison, indicating the distribution of arthritis-related prescriptions showed no differences among BNT162b2 recipients, CoronaVac recipients and non-vaccinated individuals.
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Contributors Study concept and design: XL, ICKW. Data extractions, cleaning and analysis: XT. Data validation and cross-check: PK. Data interpretation: All authors. Drafting of the manuscript: XL, XT, SHHY. Critical revision of the manuscript of significant intellectual contribution: All authors. Study supervision: ICKW. Guarantor: ICKW.

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Provenance and peer review Externally peer reviewed.

Patient consent for publication Not applicable.

Ethics approval This study was granted by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Hong Kong/Hospital Authority Hong Kong West Cluster (UW 21-199) and the Department of Health Ethics Committee (LM 21/2021). Patient identification was all anonymised and patient consent was not required.

Provenance and peer review Not commissioned; externally peer reviewed.

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**Supplementary Table 1. ICD-9 Clinical Modification (CM) Codes used for disease identification**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Diseases</th>
<th>ICD-9 CM Codes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rheumatoid arthritis</td>
<td>714</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reactive arthritis</td>
<td>099.3, 711.1, 711.3, 716.4, 716.5, 716.6, 716.9, 719.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Systemic lupus erythematosus</td>
<td>710.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spondyloarthritis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Psoriasis</td>
<td>696</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple sclerosis</td>
<td>340</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inflammatory Bowel Disease</td>
<td>555; 556</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Curry JA, Riddle MS, Gormley RP, Tribble DR, Porter CK. The epidemiology of infectious gastroenteritis related reactive arthritis in U.S. military personnel: a case-control study. BMC Infectious Diseases 2010; 10(1): 266.

**Supplementary Table 2. BNF codes used for medication**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BNF code</th>
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<td>8.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>10.1.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>10.1.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>10.1.3</td>
<td>Drug item codes in HK EMR: ABAT01/03, ABT-03, ADAL05/08/10/13/15/16, ANAK01, BARI15-18, BELI01/02/05, CERT01/02, ETAN01/04-06/08-10, FILG07/08/10, GOLI02/04-06, INFL03/04/31/33, IXEK01/02, LEFL01-03, S01257, S01311, S01315, SARI03-06, SECU02/03, TOCI01/03-09, TOFA01-05</td>
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<tr>
<td>10.1.3</td>
<td>Drug item codes in HK EMR: HYDR21; METH10, METH1D, METH1E, METH1G, METH1L; PENI04, PENI06, PENI07; SULP23</td>
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<tr>
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**Abbreviation:** BNF: British National Formulary; NSAIDs: Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs; b/tsDMARDs: biological/target synthetic disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs; csDMARDs: conventional synthetic disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs; HK EMR: Hong Kong electronic medical records
Supplementary Figure 1. Flow chart of record linkage, matching and cohort identification

HA active patients (>=16 years) between 2018/01/01-2021/07/31 (N=3,983,529)

DH Vaccination record linkage

Matched by sex and age to create pseudo index date for non-vaccinated group
N = 3,983,511

Exclude patients received different vaccines (N=18)

Exclude death before pseudo index date for non-vaccinated group, N = 10,906

Study population remained
N = 3,972,605

Patients with rheumatoid arthritis diagnosis history before index date
N = 8297

Exclude patients with diagnosis history of neoplasm, SLE, SPA, PsA, IBD, MS before index date, N=2804

Non-vaccinated = 4169
BNT162b2 two doses vaccinated = 653
CoronaVac two doses vaccinated= 671

Abbreviation: HA: Hospital Authority of Hong Kong; DH: Department of Health of Hong Kong government; SLE: systemic lupus erythematosus; SPA: spondyloarthritis; PsA: psoriasis; IBD: inflammatory bowel disease; MS: multiple sclerosis.
Supplementary Figure 2. Number of patients with rheumatoid arthritis who took at least one dose Covid-19 vaccines between February and July 2021 in Hong Kong