

Spa therapy in rheumatoid arthritis: a crossover trial

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Objective: This study aims to investigate whether 2-week spa therapy, as an adjunct to usual pharmacological therapy, has any beneficial effect in patients with rheumatoid arthritis (RA).

Methods: In this single-blind crossover study, 50 patients were randomly assigned in a 1:1 manner to receive usual pharmacological therapy plus 2-week spa therapy or usual pharmacological therapy alone (period 1.6 months); after a 9-month washout, patients were crossed over to the opposite assignment (period 2.6 months). Spa therapy program included a daily saline balneotherapy session at 36–37 °C for 20 min except Sundays. The clinical outcomes were evaluated at baseline, after spa therapy (2 weeks) and 3 and 6 months after the spa therapy in both period and were pain (Visual Analogue Scale (VAS)), patient and physician global assessments (VAS), Health Assessment Questionnaire (HAQ), and Disease Activity Score (DAS28).

Results: Spa therapy was superior to control therapy in improving all the assessed clinical outcomes at the end of the spa therapy. This superiority persisted significantly in physician global assessment ($p = 0.010$) and with a trend in favor of spa group in patient global assessment ($p = 0.058$), function ($p = 0.092$), and disease activity ($p = 0.098$) at 3 months. Statistically significant improvements were found in spa therapy compared to control in disease activity ($p = 0.006$) and patient ($p = 0.020$) and physician global ($p = 0.011$) assessments, and a trend toward improvements in pain ($p = 0.069$) and swollen joints ($p = 0.070$) at 6 months.

Conclusion: A 2-week spa therapy adjunct to usual pharmacological therapy provided beneficial clinical effects compared to usual pharmacological therapy alone, in RA patients treated with traditional disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs. These beneficial effects lasted for 6 months.