

THE HIDDEN BURDEN OF VISIBILITY: SOCIAL APPEARANCE ANXIETY IN PATIENTS WITH ALOPECIA AREATA – A COMPARATIVE CROSS-SECTIONAL STUDY

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BACKGROUND AND AIM: Alopecia Areata (AA) is a chronic autoimmune dermatologic disorder characterized by non-scarring hair loss in visible regions such as the scalp, eyebrows, and eyelashes. Although medically benign, AA may impose a substantial psychosocial burden due to its impact on appearance. We hypothesized that lesion visibility would be more strongly associated with social appearance anxiety than with generalized anxiety or depressive symptoms.]

METHODS: This comparative cross-sectional study included 129 patients with AA and 142 age- and sex-matched healthy controls (18–65 years). Participants completed the Social Appearance Anxiety Scale (SAAS; 16 items, total score range 16–80) and the Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale (HADS). AA patients additionally completed the Dermatology Life Quality Index (DLQI) and a Visual Analog Scale (VAS) assessing perceived disease severity. Dermatologists evaluated lesion localization and visibility. Group comparisons, one-way ANOVA, and correlation analyses were conducted. (Protocol No: 020/02-14; February 21, 2020)

RESULTS: Patients with AA demonstrated significantly higher SAAS scores compared to controls (65.32 ± 8.45 vs. 21.45 ± 9.32 ;

$p < 0.001$), corresponding to a very large effect size (Cohen's $d \approx 3.4$). Scores were within the validated SAAS range (16–80), indicating a substantial difference in appearance-related distress between groups. No significant differences were observed in HADS-Anxiety or HADS-Depression scores. Within the AA group, SAAS scores showed a moderate positive correlation with perceived severity (VAS; $r = 0.304$, $p < 0.05$). ANOVA analyses indicated significantly higher SAAS scores in patients with facial involvement, particularly eyebrow and eyelash involvement, compared to less visible regions. DLQI scores were more strongly associated with perceived severity and visibility than with lesion count or total affected area.

CONCLUSIONS: Social appearance anxiety in AA appears more closely associated with lesion visibility and subjective illness perception than with generalized psychopathology. These findings underscore the importance of assessing appearance-related distress in dermatology settings, particularly in patients with involvement of visible sites.

Keywords: Alopecia areata, body image disturbance, chronic skin disorders, psychodermatology, quality of life, social appearance anxiety