

## Review

## Impact of climate change on rheumatic diseases: A scoping review

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** Although the impacts of climate change on human health conditions are reasonably well documented, specific influences on rheumatic diseases remain incompletely characterized. The goal of this scoping review was to better understand how climate change is impacting rheumatic diseases, either directly or indirectly, as well as how climate change affects the geographical distribution of infectious diseases with arthritogenic manifestations, which will impact rheumatic disease care.

**Methods:** A scoping review was conducted according to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR).

**Results:** 149 papers were identified regarding the impact of climate change related exposures on patients with rheumatic diseases. The most common climate-related exposure was air pollution, with other factors including excess heat or cold, precipitation, exposure to ultraviolet light, and malnutrition. The vast majority of studies identified associations of climate related factors with increased disease activity or incidence. 105 studies were identified that addressed the influence of climate change on the observed or projected changes in the geographical range of diseases with arthritogenic manifestations spread by arthropods or environmental vectors. The majority of studies focused on dengue, Lyme disease and chikungunya and found an increase in the geographical range with climate change. A grey literature search of rheumatology organization websites suggests that the field of rheumatology remains inadequately prepared for climate change impacts.

**Conclusions:** The existing literature was summarized and gaps were highlighted that are deserving of further exploration such that rheumatologists can be better prepared to care for their patients, educate them on potential health harms, and advocate for policies to proactively address the climate crisis.

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## 1. Introduction

Climate change, driven by anthropogenic emissions, poses an existential threat to humanity [1]. Despite 2023 being the hottest

**Abbreviations:** BMI, body mass index; CO, carbon monoxide; CTD-ILD, connective tissue disease-related interstitial lung disease; CONUT, Controlled Nutritional Status Score; JIA, juvenile idiopathic arthritis; KD, Kawasaki disease; NHANES, National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey; NRI, nutritional risk index; O<sub>3</sub>, ozone; OA, osteoarthritis; PM<sub>2.5</sub>, particulate matter 2.5 micrometers or smaller; PM<sub>10</sub>, particulate matter 10 micrometers or smaller; PRISMA, Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses; NO<sub>2</sub>, nitrogen dioxide; RA, rheumatoid arthritis; SSC, scleroderma and systemic sclerosis; SpA, spondyloarthropathy; SLE, systemic lupus erythematosus; UV, ultraviolet

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year on record, emissions continue to trend upwards [2]. Unprecedented upticks in heat-related deaths, food insecurity due to drought, and life-threatening infectious diseases from climate change are all being amplified in the face of inadequate action. The climate emergency is driving further social disparities, as impacts on human health disproportionately affect those who have contributed least to this issue [3,4,5].

Although the impacts of climate change and resultant extreme weather events on human health conditions are reasonably well documented [6], specific influences on rheumatic diseases remain incompletely characterized [7]. Furthermore, defining a causal role for climate change in rheumatic diseases may be less obvious, as the underpinnings of autoimmunity and inflammation are indeed complex and the evolution of disease more insidious in nature. Evidence suggests that autoimmune diseases are on the rise, as reflected in

part by the increasing prevalence of positive antinuclear antibody (ANA) blood tests that can be associated with diseases such as systemic lupus erythematosus [8,9]. Environmental factors, such as air pollution driven by the burning of fossil fuels and wildfires, may initiate or trigger flares of autoimmune and inflammatory diseases. Extreme weather events, food insecurity and malnutrition, forced migration, and ecoanxiety are some of the downstream consequences of climate change that will impact rheumatic diseases unfavorably [10].

The changing climate is creating conditions that are altering the global footprint of various infectious diseases, including many vector-borne diseases and infections with arthritogenic manifestations that can be mimickers or catalysts of rheumatic diseases. Dengue, chikungunya and Lyme disease are growing threats that are rapidly becoming endemic in new areas. Excess cases of coccidioidomycosis are being driven by drought conditions that facilitate transmission. Understanding how climate change is impacting disease transmission and causing extended seasonality will enable more effective adaptation strategies to mitigate health impacts [11].

The global rheumatology community needs to be prepared for how our rapidly changing environment will impact rheumatic diseases as well as lead to an increased infectious disease burden, which will complicate diagnosis and management of our largely immunosuppressed patient population. Rheumatologists need to be able to identify and address the impacts of climate change on rheumatic diseases to enhance patient care and help them prepare for anticipated downstream consequences [10].

This scoping review aims to investigate the intersections between climate change and rheumatic diseases, as well as their potential ramifications on infectious diseases with arthritogenic manifestations. Specifically, the objectives are: (1) to elucidate the current understanding of the relationship between climate change, including extreme weather events and air pollutants derived from fossil fuels, and its impact on various rheumatic diseases; 2) to explore the association between malnutrition (an anticipated consequence of climate change) and its influence on the onset, severity, and outcomes of rheumatic diseases; 3) to examine the evolving changes in geographical distribution of infectious diseases with arthritogenic manifestations in the context of climate change-induced environmental shifts; 4) to identify gaps in existing literature and areas for future research regarding the effects of climate change on rheumatic diseases and infectious diseases with rheumatic manifestations; and 5) to provide valuable insights for rheumatologists to better understand and address the implications of climate change on patient care and public health strategies related to rheumatic diseases.

## 2. Methods

This review was conducted according to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 guidelines [12] and the PRISMA Extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) [13].

### 2.1. Research questions identified

Anticipating the various dimensions of climate change impacts that rheumatologists might encounter globally, this scoping review employed a search strategy divided into 1) climate change impacts on rheumatic diseases, and 2) climate change impacts on infections with arthritogenic manifestations.

Specifically, the following two research questions were explored:

- (1) What is known about the relationship between rheumatic diseases and a) climate change (including extreme weather events), b) specific pollutants (including from fossil fuels that contribute to

**Table 1**  
Summary of search terms.

Category	Included conditions or infections
Climate change	Climate change, global warming, greenhouse effect greenhouse gas, extreme temperature, heat wave, hurricanes, cyclones, tropical storms, floods, drought, wildfires, ultraviolet light, air pollution, malnutrition
and rheumatic diseases	Systemic lupus erythematosus, rheumatoid arthritis, psoriatic arthritis, scleroderma, juvenile inflammatory arthritis, childhood Lupus, Sjogren's, myositis, gout, polymyalgia rheumatica, vasculitis, Kawasaki's, reactive arthritis, ankylosing spondylitis, interstitial lung disease associated with connective tissue disease, osteoarthritis, fibromyalgia, Behcet's, sarcoidosis
or infections with rheumatic manifestations	Alphavirus, chikungunya virus, Sindbis virus, Ross River virus, O'nyong'nyong, Semliki Forest virus, Mayaro virus, Barmah Forest virus, Dengue virus, Borrelia, Rickettsia, Aspergillus, Histoplasma, Cryptococcus, Coccidioides, Lyme

climate change), and c) malnutrition (that can be a consequence of climate change) on rheumatic disease?

- (2) What is known about how climate change may alter geographic ranges of infectious diseases that have arthritogenic manifestations?

### 2.2. Search strategy

For the first research question, search terms were used relating to climate change or related exposures and rheumatic diseases. A variety of rheumatic diseases were included with climate change and related exposures as search criteria (hurricanes, cyclones, tropical storms, heatwaves, floods, drought, wildfires, and air pollution) in order to capture a larger number of studies that would be pertinent to the primary research question (Table 1).

The second research question sought to explore the influence of climate change on the evolving risk of infectious diseases with arthritogenic manifestations. The search criteria included studies or evidence of climate change factors associated with viral, bacterial, or fungal agents with arthropod or environmental spread that can cause arthritic manifestations (Table 1) [14–16]. The studies selected for the review process specifically addressed a change in geographical range associated with climate change.

The electronic databases PubMed and Embase were queried on July 5th, 2023, for the years 2008 to 2023. Reviews, systematic reviews, meta-analyses, and editorials were excluded. Detailed search queries are available in Appendix A. A targeted search in the Scopus database for relevant articles published in the Journal of Climate Change and Health was added on September 5th, 2023, as this journal includes pertinent literature but is not included in the Medline (PubMed) and Embase journal coverage lists.

A targeted search of the gray literature was performed employing two different strategies. A Google search was performed with the term “climate change” matched sequentially with each of the terms for rheumatic diseases and infections or vectors listed in Table 1. The search targeted original data since 2008 addressing the research questions within the first 5 screen pages of findings. A second approach consisted of reviewing the websites of 7 major international rheumatology organizations in September 2023 for any articles, position statements, newsletters, or podcasts related to climate change or related exposures.

### 2.3. Study selection

The Covidence systematic review platform was utilized for study screening and data extraction. Two authors (TRK and TB) independently screened the citation titles and abstracts for inclusion and

**Table 2**  
Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria.

Category	Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Concept	Involves climate change or a climate change-related exposure Specific rheumatic diseases included per methods Impact on the onset, severity, serologies, outcomes or care of rheumatic diseases noted Specific infectious diseases or vectors included per methods Describes a change in geographic range of infectious disease of vector related to climate change	Does not involve climate change or a climate change-related exposure Specific rheumatic diseases were not identified per methods No description of impact of the onset, severity, serologies, outcomes or care of rheumatic diseases Specific infectious diseases or vectors not included per methods Does not describe a change in geographic range of infectious disease of vector related to climate change
Language	English	Not English
Timeframe	2008–2023	Prior to 2008
Article	Articles with full text	Articles with abstract only, conference posters only, case reports or full text not available

exclusion criteria. Any discrepancies were resolved by a 3rd reviewer (LS) (Table 2). These two authors (TRK and TB) then reviewed the full text for papers that met inclusion criteria and a third author (LS) resolved any discrepancies.

#### 2.4. Data abstraction

A data abstraction form was employed to record publication date, geographical location, study design, climate change-related exposure, rheumatic disease, organ, or laboratory test affected, infectious disease or vector, and outcomes. The full text for papers were independently reviewed by authors (TB, TK, LS, CD), with discrepancies resolved by the reviewers with a final decision by one author (TB). Results were organized for analysis using an Excel spreadsheet.

### 3. Results

A total of 12,077 records were identified with the database literature search using terms that pertained to climate change, rheumatic diseases, and infectious diseases with arthritogenic manifestations (Fig. 1). Based on the eligibility criteria, 254 studies were identified for data extraction.

The study years for the papers regarding rheumatic diseases and infections are shown in Fig. 2. There was a steady increase in papers in recent years, particularly those focused on rheumatic diseases.

The categorization of geographical locations of the studies was adapted from the United Nations M49 Standard of regions and subregions [17] with the addition of the Mediterranean Basin [18] (Fig. 3). For research question 1, the included publications on rheumatic diseases consisted of 149 studies. Most of the studies were from Asia ( $N = 52$ , 35%), and the Global South was notably less well represented (Fig. 3A and Appendix B). For research question 2, the included publications on infectious diseases with arthritogenic manifestations consisted of 105 studies, with the largest number of studies from North America ( $N = 30$ , 29%) (Fig. 3B and Appendix C).

#### 3.1. Rheumatic diseases

One hundred and forty-nine papers were identified regarding the impact of climate change related exposures on patients with a variety of rheumatic diseases [19–167]. Of the seventeen different rheumatic diseases included, the most well represented conditions were rheumatoid arthritis (RA), systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE), Kawasaki disease (KD) and systemic sclerosis (SSc) (Appendix D). Studies were conducted in a wide variety of geographical locations. Africa was underrepresented, with only 1 study.

The impacts of climate change related exposures on rheumatic diseases are listed in Table 3. The most common exposure was air pollution, with other factors including excess heat or cold, precipitation, exposure to ultraviolet (UV) light, and malnutrition. Of note no

papers were identified that specifically focused on extreme weather events (i.e., hurricanes, floods, drought) from climate change.

Each study was reviewed to determine if there was an impact of the factors related to climate change on disease activity or incidence. Indicators of disease activity included changes in direct measures of disease activity, changes in the rate of hospital admissions and/or ambulatory visits, changes in laboratory serologies, and changes in the mortality rates. Most studies demonstrated an association with climate related factors and increased disease activity or incidence.

The specific climate related factors associated with each rheumatic disease are listed in Table 4. The table includes a guide to references for each disease. More details about individual studies can be found in Appendix B. Key studies that illustrate the interaction between climate change driven environmental factors and rheumatic diseases are discussed below.

##### 3.1.1. Rheumatoid arthritis

**3.1.1.1. Pollution.** Seventeen studies on RA found an association of pollution with the incidence, prevalence, and severity of disease, including disease activity and frequency of disease flares (Table 4). Six of these studies were from China, Taiwan, and South Korea, countries which have exceeded the WHO's recommended levels for PM2.5 pollutant concentrations according to the World Air Quality report [168]. Regarding the onset of RA, anti-citrullinated peptide antibodies are highly specific autoantibodies in RA. Four studies [25,33,34,30] found an association with air pollution, specifically PM2.5, with the onset (as determined by the development of anti-citrullinated peptide antibodies or clinical diagnosis) or severity of rheumatoid arthritis. Four studies found no association of pollutants with RA incidence [50,51], RA flare [49], or autoantibodies and joint symptoms [48].

**3.1.1.2. Malnutrition.** Food insecurity and malnutrition are predicted to become increasingly problematic, due to economic hardship exacerbated by extreme weather events and forced migration as well as by other factors related to climate change, such as declining crop yields [169,170]. Six studies on malnutrition and RA were identified. In a cohort of 1976 RA patients from the NHANES database, the prevalence of malnutrition ranged from 18.8% (based on the Controlled Nutritional Status Score, CONUT) up to 26.6% (based on the nutritional risk index, NRI) and was strongly associated with an increased risk of all-cause mortality [36]. In a Brazilian cohort, almost one-third of patients demonstrated nutritional impairment which was associated with increased disease activity and loss of function [38].

**3.1.1.3. Temperature changes and UV exposure.** Temperature changes had mixed effects on RA, with two studies citing worsening arthritis with cold exposure [43,44] and one study showing associations of extremely high diurnal temperature ranges with an increased risk for RA hospitalizations [45]. A review of 14,401 patients with rheumatic

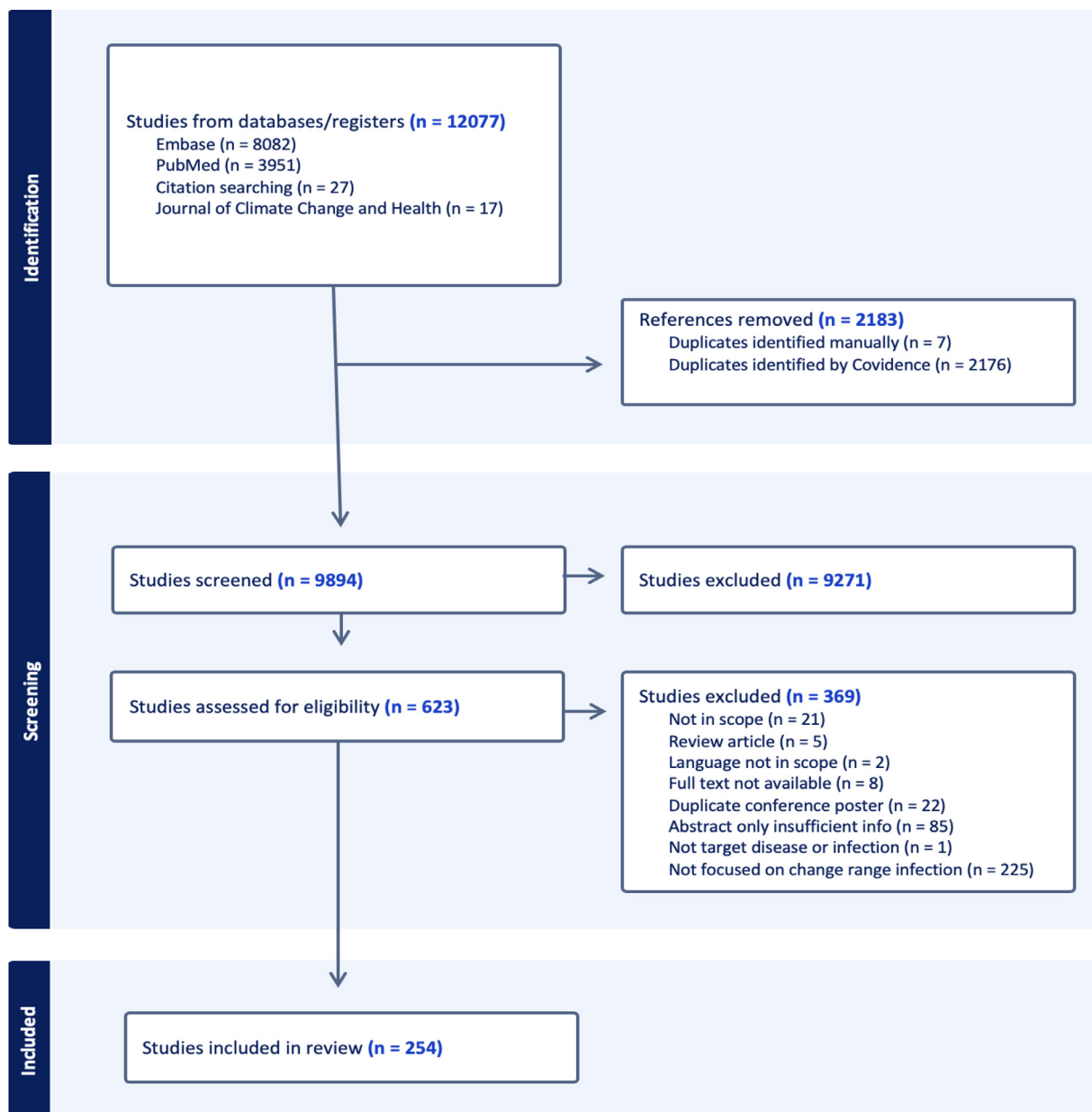


Fig. 1. PRISMA flow diagram of selection of studies for inclusion in the scoping review.

diseases found that individuals living in areas with the highest heat vulnerability index had 1.64 times greater odds of 4 or more hospitalizations [87]. Three studies, including the Nurses' Health Study cohort and the NHANES database, showed no clear association of UV exposure with RA [52-54].

### 3.1.2. Systemic lupus erythematosus

3.1.2.4. *Pollution.* Twelve studies reported positive associations between pollution (short- and long-term exposure) and SLE. In terms of short-term pollutant exposure, an evaluation of 237 SLE patients in Montreal showed that short term variations in PM2.5 levels were associated with disease activity as reflected by anti-dsDNA levels and cellular casts [60]. A large multicenter database with 8552 SLE patients in China found that PM2.5 and NO2 were risk factors for lupus nephritis within one month after exposure [58]. Long-term pollutant exposure demonstrated an exposure-response association with CO, NO2 and PM2.5 [59]. Several studies showed a positive association of pollutants with risk for SLE hospitalization [55,56,62,63,65].

One study found a positive association of SLE hospitalizations not only with NOx pollution in the air, but also in water, when studying districts with concentrated chemical industry emission areas [56]. Another study did not find an association between ANA positivity and the pollutants NO2, PM2.5 or O3 using Bayesian Kernel machine regression, however notably these ANA positive subjects did not have a known diagnosis of SLE [72].

3.1.2.5. *UV exposure and temperature.* Ultraviolet radiation exposure has been associated with flares of SLE symptoms, in particular photosensitive rashes in patients with acute or subacute cutaneous lupus [171,172]. However, risk for the development of SLE due to UV exposure has been less well characterized. In a case control study of 258 SLE patients, an association was seen with outdoor work in the 12 months preceding the diagnosis of SLE (OR 2.0; 95 % CI 1.1, 3.8) with the strongest effect observed in those who reported a blistering sunburn or rash following exposure to midday sun (OR 7.9; 95 % CI 0.97, 64.7) [69]. The Nurses' Health Study looked at 6,054,665 person-years of UV exposure and identified 297 incident SLE cases. They found that

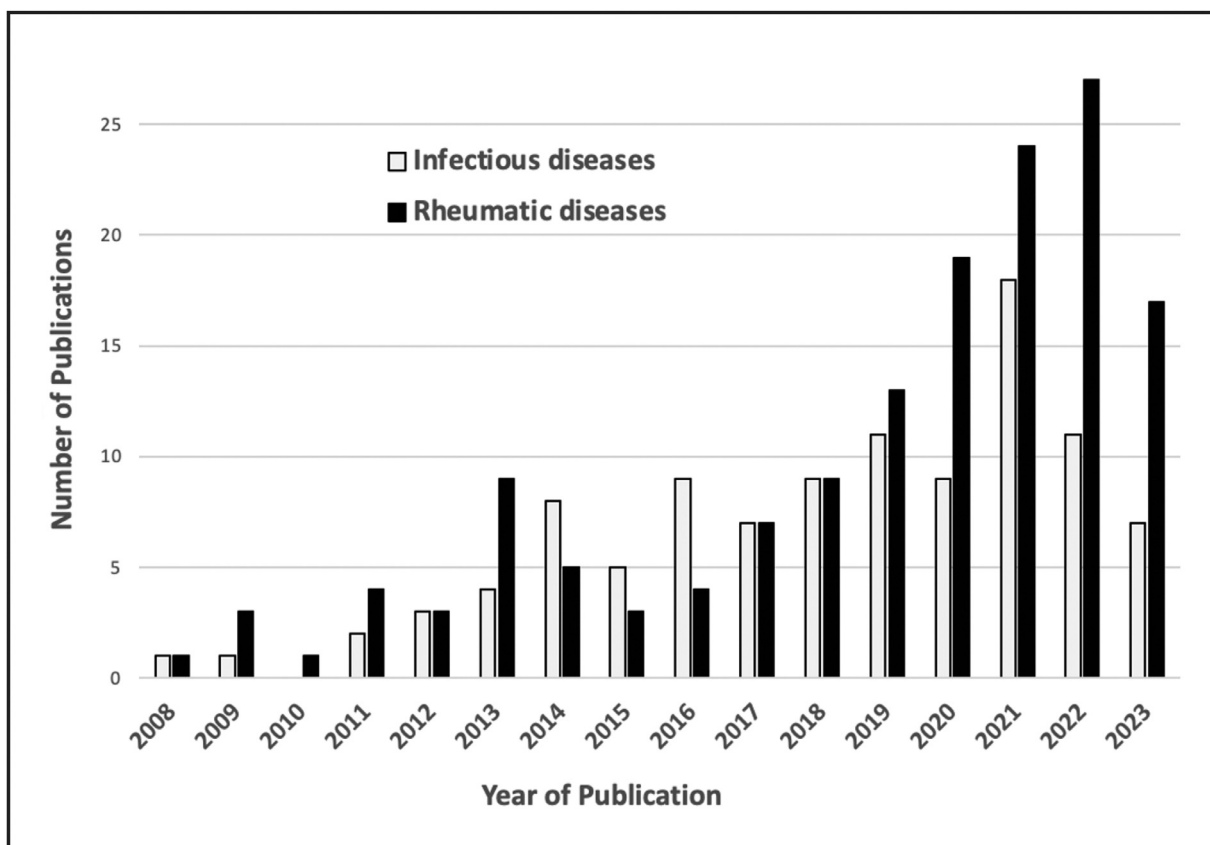


Fig. 2. Number of publications over time on the impact of climate change or related exposures on rheumatic diseases or infectious diseases with arthritogenic manifestations.

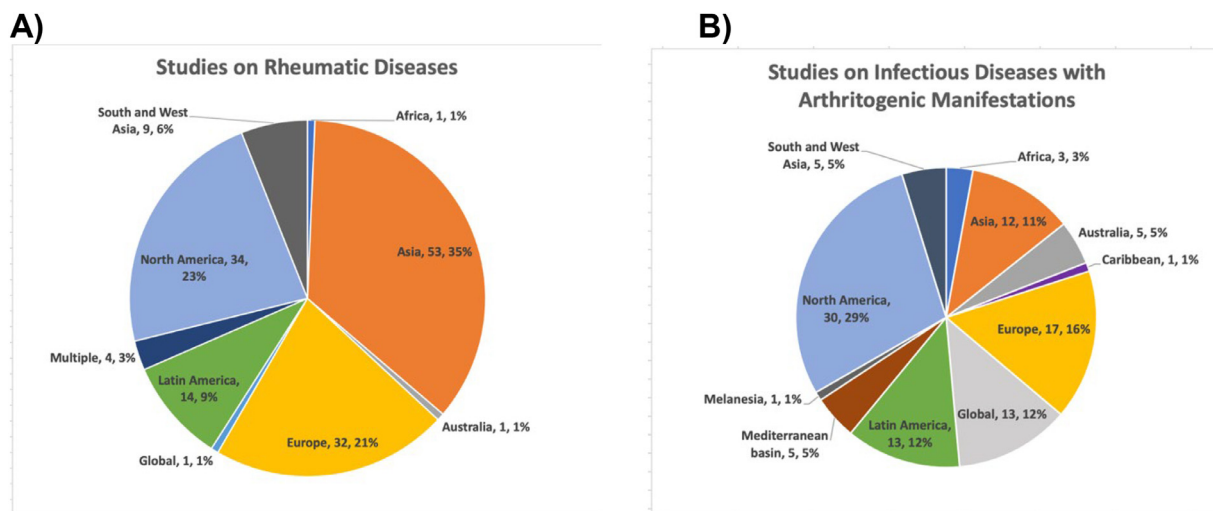


Fig. 3. Geographical locations of the research studies on rheumatic diseases (A) and infectious diseases with arthritogenic manifestations (B) with number of studies and percentage of regions.

women in the highest tertile of UV exposure had an increased risk of malar rash (HR 1.62 [95 % CI 1.04–2.52]); however the risk of overall SLE was not significantly increased when comparing the highest to lowest UV exposure tertile [70]. A study conducted in Southern France showed strong positive correlations between lupus flares and maximum temperature increase, with most lupus flares occurring in the spring season [71]. However, other studies did not find this same association [73–75].

3.1.2.6. *Malnutrition.* The prognostic nutritional index (PNI) and nutritional risk index (NRI) are useful as screening tools for patient prognosis in several diseases. The PNI and NRI were significantly lower in patients with active vs. inactive SLE ( $p < 0.001$  and  $p = 0.012$ , respectively) suggesting that nutrition status can impact SLE disease activity [67]. The prevalence of obesity is rising and may be associated with nutrient deficiencies that could contribute to inflammation. In a cross-sectional study of 130 SLE patients, patients with excess

**Table 3**  
Change in rheumatic disease activity from climate change related exposures.

Climate exposure	Total # studies	Disease activity or incidence (# studies)		
		Increased	Unchanged	Decreased
Air pollution	87	74	12	1
Malnutrition	21	21	0	0
Temperature	13	10	3	0
UV light	9	6	1	2
UV light and temperature	6	2	3	1
Air pollution and temperature	3	3	0	0
Weather system changes*	2	2	0	0
Precipitation	1	1	0	0
Climate change	0	0	0	0
<b>Total **</b>	<b>142</b>	<b>119 (84%)</b>	<b>19 (13%)</b>	<b>4 (3%)</b>

\* El Nino Southern Oscillation.

\*\* In 7 studies, disease activity or incidence could not be determined.

weight (BMI > 25 kg/m<sup>2</sup>) demonstrated a higher clinical activity score using the Mexican SLEDAI (Mex-SLEDAI) [68].

### 3.1.3. Kawasaki disease

Kawasaki disease is a multi-system vasculitis that predominantly occurs in infants and young children and is thought to have an environmental trigger. For example, a consistent pattern of large-scale wind currents originating in central Asia and traveling across the North Pacific seemed to be temporally associated with new hospital admissions of KD cases [100]. An increased occurrence of KD was identified during months with warmer night-time temperatures which in turn correlates with southerly and south-westerly winds [102]. Six studies suggested a possible relationship of KD with prenatal and postnatal exposure to several different pollutants. Only 3 studies failed to establish any correlation between pollutants and KD when examining the short-term exposure of patients to fine particulate matter [103,97,102].

### 3.1.4. Systemic sclerosis

Two studies explored the correlation between environmental pollution and SSc disease severity. One study suggested the possibility of

**Table 4**  
Impact of climate factors on rheumatic diseases.

Rheumatic disease	Total # studies [Ref #]	Disease activity or incidence (# studies)		
		Increased by factor	Unchanged by factor	Decreased by factor
Rheumatoid arthritis (RA)	36 [19-54]*	Air pollution: 17 Malnutrition: 6 Temperature: 3 Precipitation: 1	Air pollution: 4 UV light: 1 UV light and temperature: 1	UV light: 1
Systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE)	21 [55-75]	Air pollution: 11 Malnutrition: 2 UV light 2: Air pollution and temperature: 1 UV light and temperature: 1	UV light and temperature: 2 Air pollution: 1	UV light and temperature: 1
Multiple diseases**	16 [76-91]*	Air pollution: 10 Temperature: 2 Air pollution and temperature: 1	Air pollution: 2	
Kawasaki	12 [92-103]	Air pollution: 5 Weather systems: 2 Air pollution and temperature: 1 Temperature: 1	Air pollution: 3	
Scleroderma	12 [104-115]*	Malnutrition: 9 Air pollution: 1	Air pollution: 1	
Sjogren's	7 [116-122]	Air pollution: 6 UV light and temperature: 1		
Myositis	6 [123-128]	Air pollution: 3 UV light: 3		
Spondyloarthropathy (SpA)	5 [129-133]*	Air pollution: 3 Temperature: 1		
Gout	5 [134-138]	Air pollution: 3 Temperature: 2		
Osteoarthritis (OA)	4 [139-142]	Air pollution: 2	Temperature: 2	
Childhood lupus	4 [143-146]	Air pollution: 4		
CTD related ILD#	4 [147-150]	Air pollution: 3		Air pollution: 1
Juvenile inflammatory arthritis (JIA)	3 [151-153]	Air pollution: 2	Air pollution: 1	
Behcets	3 [154-156]*	Malnutrition: 2		
Others***	11 [157-167]*	Air pollution: 4 Malnutrition: 2 Temperature: 1 UV light: 1	Temperature: 1	UV light: 1

\* Includes studies in which disease activity or incidence could not be determined.

\*\* Multiple diseases include: RA (9), SLE (8), scleroderma (6), SpA (6), Sjogren (5), myositis (5), OA (5), UCTD (3), vasculitis (1), gout (1).

# Connective tissue disease (CTD) related interstitial lung disease (ILD).

\*\*\* Others: fibromyalgia (3), arthritis (2), pediatric CTD (2), vasculitis (2) CTD (1), sarcoid (1).

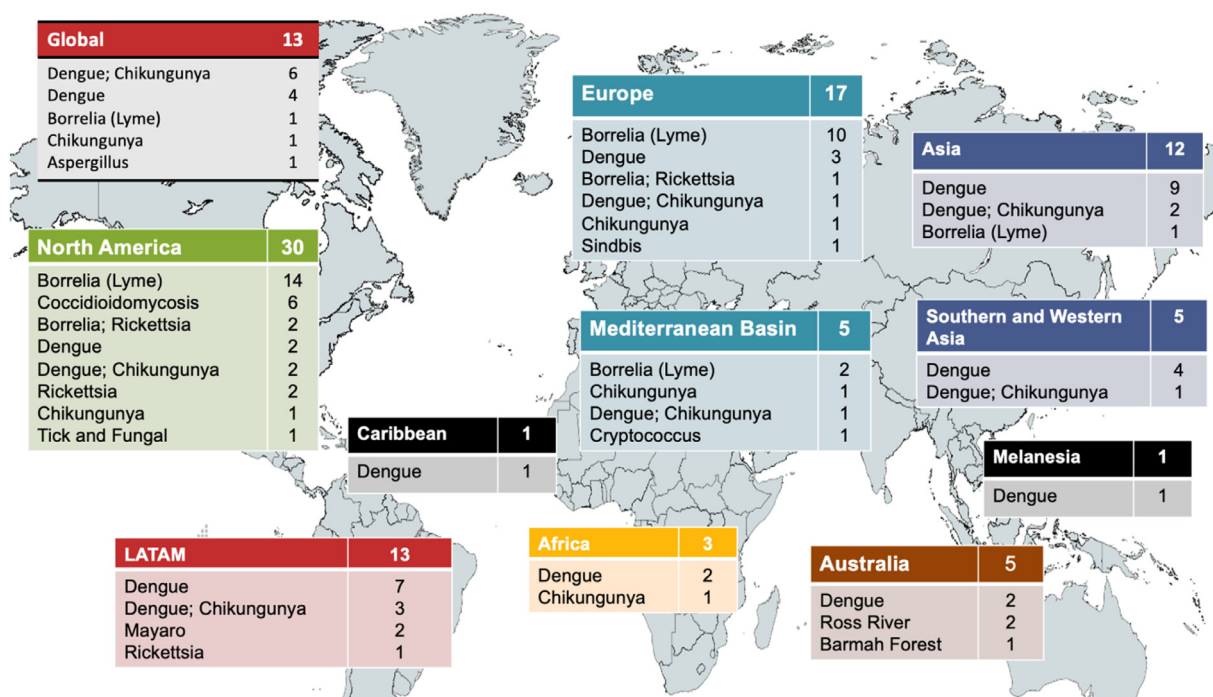


Fig. 4. Number of studies showing infectious diseases with arthritogenic manifestations with a change in range by geographic region. LATAM=Latin America.

adverse disease progression and lung involvement of patients with SSc on exposure to benzene [115], while another described more severe internal organ involvement on exposure to particulate matter [104].

Nine studies investigating the relationship between malnutrition and SSc detected a significant association between malnutrition and systemic involvement including skin, pulmonary and gastrointestinal manifestations. Significantly lower bone density was also noted among patients with SSc having malnutrition [108]. In another study, high nutritional risk detected by the Malnutrition Universal Screening Tool (MUST) was demonstrated to predict mortality among patients with SSc [105].

### 3.1.5. Sjogren's

A time-series study conducted in Hefei, China showed significant associations between extreme environmental exposures (i.e., long sunshine days, extreme cold, and high humidity) with an increase in outpatient visits for Sjogren's [122]. Six other studies showed positive correlations between air pollution and Sjogren's. In particular, two studies showed correlations between air pollution and ocular surface damage [116] or tear lipid layer thickness [120]. Additional studies reported that exposure to CO, NO and CH4 were associated with a higher risk of incident Sjogren's, PM2.5, PM10, NO2, and CO correlated with an elevated risk of hospitalizations [117,118], and PM2.5 and NO2 were associated with increased risk for outpatient visits [119].

### 3.1.6. Other diseases

**3.1.6.7. Connective tissue disease-associated ILD (CTD-ILD).** Four studies investigated the impact of air pollution on CTD-ILD. One found that among patients with RA, there was a higher risk of the development of RA-ILD in those with higher levels of exposure to PM2.5 [147]. Another demonstrated a higher rate of hospitalization for RA-ILD with higher levels of exposure to PM2.5, PM10, SO2, and NO2 [149]. Among patients with SSc-ILD, high levels of exposure to O3 were associated with more severe ILD at diagnosis as well as progression at 24 months [148]. However, a review of patients with several

rheumatic conditions (SLE, RA, SSc, dermatomyositis/polymyositis) found a decreased risk of development of ILD with higher exposure to O3 in patients with SLE [150].

**3.1.6.8. Spondyloarthritis.** Spondyloarthritis encompasses a group of diagnoses that includes ankylosing spondylitis, psoriasis and psoriatic arthritis, reactive arthritis, and inflammatory bowel-disease related arthritis. In two studies, exposure to air pollution (specifically PM2.5 and CO) was associated with higher disease activity of ankylosing spondylitis [130,131]. Another study found that psoriasis patients had more flares in their skin disease when exposed to higher levels of air pollution before their clinical visits [129]. Two studies also suggested that malnutrition (in the form of high fat diet or nutritional deficiencies) may play a role in SpA disease activity [131,133].

**3.1.6.9. Gout.** Three studies found that air pollution was associated with an increased incidence of gout and/or gout flares [134-136]. Two studies found that higher temperature was associated with a higher risk of developing a gout attack [137,138].

**3.1.6.10. Childhood lupus.** There were four studies, all based out of Brazil, that assessed the relationship between disease activity of childhood lupus (clinical organ involvement and/or serologic markers) and air pollution exposure. Higher exposures to PM10, NO2, and CO were associated with higher lupus disease activity (SLE-DAI-2 K) [143] and increased PM2.5 and NO2 exposure was associated with higher markers of renal disease [144].

## 3.2. Infectious diseases with arthritogenic manifestations

One hundred and five studies were identified that addressed the influence of climate change on the observed or projected change in the geographical range of diseases with arthritogenic manifestations spread by arthropods or environmental vectors [173-277]. The studies were distributed throughout the world (Fig. 4), though the spectrum of diseases encountered in each region varied considerably. Most of the studies tracked temperature and precipitation due to climate change as the primary variables. The focus was on changes in

**Table 5**  
Infectious diseases with arthritogenic manifestations with changes in the geographical range.

Infection	Total # studies [Ref #]	Change in geographical range (# studies)		
		Increased	Variable or unchanged	Decreased
Dengue	35 [173-207]	32	3	0
Borrelia (Lyme disease)	28 [208-235]	19	9	0
Dengue and Chikungunya	16 [236-251]	8	8	0
Coccidioidomycosis	6 [252-257]	6	0	0
Chikungunya	5 [258-262]	4	1	0
Rickettsia (RMSF)	3 [263-265]	1	1	1
Others*	12 [266-277]	7	5	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>105</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>1</b>

\*Others includes Aspergillus (1), Mayaro virus (2), Sindbis virus (1), Ross River virus (2), Barmah Forest virus (1), Borrelia and Rickettsia (3), Cryptococcus (1), Tick/fungal (1). No studies were identified regarding Semliki virus, O'nyong nyong virus, or Histoplasmosis.

the expected ranges of these diseases since rheumatologists need to be concerned about new or increased risks of infection in their region of practice.

The majority of studies focused on dengue, Lyme disease and chikungunya. An increase in the geographical range with climate change was found with most infections (Table 5). A detailed listing of the papers can be found in Appendix C. Some of the key studies that illustrate the changes in range are discussed below.

### 3.2.1. Dengue

Dengue, the most common infection noted in the papers that were reviewed, is transmitted between humans by female *Aedes* mosquitoes which are projected to expand in range to more temperate areas and higher altitudes with warming global temperatures. One study estimated the global population at risk for dengue could expand by 1.6 billion by 2070 using more severe climate scenarios [189]. As noted in Fig. 4, every geographical region in this review included studies on dengue, with an increased range noted in 31 of 34 papers. At particular risk of range expansion will be the temperate areas of North America and Europe [189,186].

### 3.2.2. Borrelia (Lyme disease)

Lyme disease is caused by *Borrelia burgdorferi* and transmitted to humans by ixodid ticks. Although tick survival depends on several factors, temperature is a key determinant of the survival of ixodid populations [219]. Twenty of twenty-nine modeling studies projected an increase in suitable areas for ixodid ticks with climate change, particularly in North America and Europe [231,221,229].

### 3.2.3. Coccidioidomycosis

Coccidioidomycosis (Valley fever) is a fungal disease that is endemic to the southwestern United States and parts of Central and South America. Human illness is contracted by inhaling fungal spores. The growth cycles of *Coccidioides* spp. are driven by a complex balance of temperature and precipitation [252]. The six studies in this review, all from North America, predicted a marked increase in the expected range of coccidioidomycosis in the western United States with climate model projections.

### 3.2.4. Chikungunya

Chikungunya is a mosquito-borne arboviral disease transmitted by *Aedes* species mosquitoes. Historically confined to tropical settings, it can spread to other regions with favorable combinations of

temperature and rainfall. Studies regarding chikungunya, often in combination with dengue, were found in most regions of the world. Many of the studies project a spread in its geographical range with future climate scenarios, particularly to China, sub-Saharan Africa, South America, the United States, and continental Europe [258-260]. However, nine of the twenty-one studies including chikungunya noted variable changes in range, since climate change is expected to increase temperatures beyond the suitable range for transmission in many parts of the world [247,246].

### 3.2.5. Rickettsia (RMSF)

Rocky Mountain spotted fever (RMSF) is a life-threatening fulminant tick-borne infection caused by *Rickettsia rickettsii*. Projecting climate induced changes in the geographical distribution of RMSF is complex, since its propagation is also impacted by land cover, landscape structure and socio-economic factors [264]. Of the six studies found in the review, 2 projected an increased range and 3 noted variable changes. A study in Brazil estimated a reduction of areas suitable for ticks of the *Amblyomma cajennense* species complex, vectors for spotted fever, due to excess heat [263].

### 3.2.6. Other infections

Nine studies investigated various other infections, including aspergillus, Mayaro virus, Sindbis virus, Ross River virus, Barmah Forest virus and cryptococcus. Six papers showed an increase in projected range with climate change, while 3 showed variable changes. Of note, no studies were identified that described changes in geographical range with climate change for Semliki Forest virus, O'nyong nyong virus or histoplasmosis.

## 3.3. Gray literature search

In the search of the websites of seven major rheumatology associations, a few contained information about climate change (Table 6). Two notable findings were a plan for a sustainable annual conference by the British Society for Rheumatology and a well-organized and extensive position statement by the Australian Rheumatology Association.

## 4. Discussion

Rheumatic diseases are chronic conditions affecting a growing number of individuals worldwide, with significant impacts on



**Table 6**  
Review of climate change issues on rheumatology organization websites (accessed September 2023).

Organization	Climate change text word search	Climate change content in articles, position statements, podcasts, newsletters
American College of Rheumatology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2 climate presentations at 2022 ACR Convergence meeting</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 podcast on environmental impacts on rheumatic diseases</li> <li>• 2 news articles on the impact of storms</li> <li>• 1 news article on chikungunya</li> </ul>
Canadian Rheumatology Association)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 article on a scientist active on climate issues</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• N/A</li> </ul>
British Society for Rheumatology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• N/A</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comprehensive sustainability plan for 2023 annual conference</li> </ul>
European Alliance of Associations for Rheumatology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• N/A</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• N/A</li> </ul>
Asia Pacific League of Associations for Rheumatology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• N/A</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• N/A</li> </ul>
African League of Association for Rheumatology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• N/A</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• N/A</li> </ul>
Australian Rheumatology Association	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 60 results on climate change issues</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comprehensive position statement</li> </ul>

morbidity and mortality, and with substantial costs to society [8,278,279]. It is estimated that 1 in 10 citizens in the UK has an auto-immune condition [280]. In addition, it is well documented that significant health disparities occur, particularly in diseases such as SLE [281]. Based on findings from this scoping review, climate change may increase known exposures associated with triggering autoimmunity, leading to increases in the incidence and severity of several rheumatic conditions, as well as drive an increased range of infections with arthritogenic manifestations. These effects will likely be more pronounced in socially vulnerable groups. There is a lack of research data linking the effects of climate change mechanistically to specific rheumatic or immunologic disease processes, and further investigation is needed.

Autoimmunity has an insidious onset, with complex and multi-step pathogenesis involving the interplay of genetic predisposition, epigenetic changes, environmental exposures, infections and alterations in the microbiome. Furthermore, socioeconomic factors have been closely associated with rheumatic disease severity, such as poverty, poor access to health care, and race/ethnicity, leading to disease initiation and perpetuation [282–287]. As this scoping review does not comprehensively address the interaction between these factors and all the potential impacts of climate change in rheumatology, we assert that there are many remaining gaps to be filled. As social disparities are increasing as a direct result of climate change, many more rheumatic patients with high social vulnerability stand to be adversely impacted [87].

#### 4.1. Impacts of climate change factors on rheumatic diseases

An initial attempt to capture the themes of climate change and its direct impacts (i.e. extreme weather events) across a wide variety of rheumatic diseases yielded minimal publications. By expanding the search to include terms capturing air pollution (driven mostly by fossil fuels which cause climate change), malnutrition (an anticipated consequence of climate change), temperature changes (but not necessarily extreme heat), and UV radiation, 149 studies were identified. This review primarily focuses on indirect climate change factors. These findings are consistent with a recent scoping review, stating that air pollution and changes in temperature were the most extensively investigated climate change factors [288]. Respiratory and cardiovascular diseases were the best represented medical conditions in the literature, perhaps given more direct and obvious mechanistic links of these climate change factors to disease pathogenesis [288].

Findings from this scoping review primarily encompassed the role of air pollutants (90 out of 142 studies, 63 %), with the vast majority showing an increase in rheumatic disease incidence and severity. Air pollution can induce systemic inflammatory responses via a variety of mechanisms [289] and has even been identified as a potential risk factor for the development of rheumatic disease [290]. There was a preponderance of studies from Asia on air pollution (39 out of 52, 75 %). Of note, the WHO global air quality guidelines from 2021 state that the limits for PM<sub>2.5</sub> and PM<sub>10</sub> are 15 ug/m<sup>3</sup> and 45 ug/m<sup>3</sup>, whereas the limits in China are notably higher at 35 ug/m<sup>3</sup> and 50 ug/m<sup>3</sup>, respectively [291]. Air pollution caused by heavy industry and mining are likely driving more severe rheumatic disease impacts in Asia.

Many studies on temperature fluctuations were associated with disease worsening; however, a few studies cited improved arthritis symptoms with warmer weather. A notable gap is that none of the studies specifically evaluated the impacts of extreme heat or extreme cold. In addition, outcomes were primarily focused on rheumatic disease activity (i.e. joint inflammation, serologies). However, given the high incidence of comorbidities in these patients [292], such as cardiovascular disease, which is known to increase susceptibility to extreme heat, the impact of temperature extremes should be further investigated in rheumatic patients [293].

Malnutrition as a general theme, but not specifically resulting from climate change, was interrogated in this scoping review. It is well accepted that climate change is projected to increase malnutrition and food insecurity via extreme weather events, drought, changes in soil fertility, decreasing crop yields, and decreasing bio-availability of nutrients in foods [294]. All studies on malnutrition unanimously reported worsening rheumatic disease measures, which highlights a health risk for which rheumatologists should be prepared.

#### 4.2. Impacts of climate change factors on infectious diseases with arthritogenic manifestations

There is a robust body of literature addressing the increasing geographic footprint and extended seasonality of several infectious diseases due to climate change, especially those that are vector-borne [11,295]. To better prepare rheumatologists for what to anticipate in different regions of the world, the focus was on infections with arthritogenic manifestations that demonstrated evolving geographic ranges in the context of climate-related exposures. The majority of studies on arthritogenic infections demonstrated an increase in

range, less frequently a variable change in range, and with only one study demonstrating a decrease in range. These infections will pose a diagnostic challenge for rheumatologists as they try to differentiate a flare of inflammatory arthritis from infectious arthritis. This is further complicated by the fact that many patients are treated with immunosuppression, rendering them more susceptible to infectious insults. An additional consideration is that in up to 40 % of patients, the chikungunya virus can cause a chronic arthritis that resembles RA and is treated with similar disease modifying anti-rheumatic agents such as methotrexate [296]. Lyme disease, anticipated to expand in geographic range and seasonality, is a well-known trigger of a post-infectious arthritis which can in some cases become chronic, with synovial pathology that is similar to RA [297]. Another study found that a history of dengue infection was significantly associated with SLE [298]. Taken together, these studies raise the concerning possibility that increases in several infectious diseases driven by climate change may in fact catalyze the onset or exacerbation of rheumatic diseases.

#### 4.3. Knowledge gaps

There are a myriad of possible mechanisms by which climate change can impact rheumatic diseases, and the current literature only begins to dissect these possibilities. For example, there is a substantial body of literature on the role of stress leading to exacerbation of rheumatic diseases via cortisol and other inflammatory cytokines [299]. “Eco-anxiety” is a term that has been recently coined to describe anxiety related to anticipation of the negative downstream impacts from climate change [300]. Displacement due to climate related disasters and food insecurity will certainly lead to increased anxiety and stress. This study did not specifically interrogate the role of climate-related stress but substantial negative consequences for our rheumatic patients could be anticipated.

The direct impacts of climate change (i.e., extreme weather events) on rheumatic diseases need further exploration. Climate change will lead to more extreme weather, including temperature and precipitation shifts and worsened air quality that will make outdoor exercise less feasible. Inactivity will lead to deconditioning and associated conditions such as obesity, which is known to exacerbate inflammation in rheumatic diseases [301]. Wildfires threatening air quality will have disproportionate impacts on patients with ILD, including ILD patients with SSc, myositis, RA, and Sjogren's, and may lead to more disease flares. Climate change can affect water sanitation which could increase enteric infections that drive complications such as reactive arthritis. A rise in the frequency of infections due to climate change should be tracked to see if they trigger an initiation or flare of autoimmune diseases [302].

There was a notable disparity in the numbers of publications from low-income countries, which are anticipated to be most heavily affected by climate change. This dearth of publications may be multifactorial, perhaps related to limited access to medical literature, lack of resources (including high publication costs), and competing work demands.

#### 4.4. Limitations

There were several limitations of this scoping review. The limitation to papers written in the English language could have introduced bias. For example, excluding non-English studies may limit the generalizability of findings to populations in non-English-speaking regions, where the prevalence or impact of autoimmune rheumatic diseases may differ. In addition, we only searched 2 major databases, did a targeted search of the *Journal of Climate Change and Health* in Scopus, performed a limited gray literature search, and excluded reviews, editorials, and conference abstracts such that some relevant publications may have been missed. A risk of bias assessment was not performed in this scoping review.

The identified studies predominantly focus on associations between indirect climate-related exposures and rheumatic diseases, with limited exploration of causal relationships or underlying mechanisms. This limitation hinders a deeper understanding of how climate change directly influences the pathophysiology of rheumatic diseases, thereby constraining the ability to develop effective preventive and management strategies.

Most studies included in the review primarily address the impact of indirect climate change exposures on rheumatic diseases in terms of disease activity or incidence, neglecting other critical aspects such as treatment responses, disease progression, and patient outcomes. This narrow focus may overlook potential nuances in the relationship between climate change and rheumatic diseases, thereby limiting the comprehensiveness of the findings.

#### 4.5. Future directions

Based on results from this scoping review, it is undeniable that climate change is currently affecting and will continue to adversely affect patients with rheumatic diseases. Future studies should aim to elucidate the underlying mechanisms through which climate-related factors influence the pathophysiology of rheumatic diseases. This requires interdisciplinary collaboration between rheumatologists, climatologists, and other relevant experts to explore the complex interactions between environmental exposures, immune responses, and genetic predispositions. Additionally, there is a need for longitudinal studies to assess the long-term effects of climate change on rheumatic disease outcomes, including disease progression, treatment responses, and patient quality of life. Longitudinal data collection will provide valuable insights into the evolving nature of rheumatic diseases in the context of changing climate patterns, facilitating the development of targeted interventions and personalized treatment strategies.

Future research should expand beyond the commonly studied rheumatic diseases such as RA and SLE to include other less well-characterized conditions such as KD and SSc. This broader focus will help identify specific vulnerabilities and susceptibilities within diverse patient populations, enabling more tailored approaches to prevention, diagnosis, and management.

The accelerating climate emergency is leading to a multitude of health harms, disproportionately impacting lower income countries and more vulnerable populations. Moving forward it will be critical to employ modern mapping data to better define high risk populations that are vulnerable to specific climate effect risks in order to devise adaptation strategies to limit harm.

The rheumatology community has only begun to define the mechanisms by which climate change is threatening human health and well-being. To date, only the Australian Rheumatology Society has issued a position statement on climate change, whereas most other rheumatology organizations have remained silent on this issue. Medical organizations can be powerful agents of change through advocacy, education, and research. It is incumbent upon rheumatologists to be aware of the health hazards resulting from climate change and to consider how these hazards may be impacting our rheumatic patients. Importantly, we must continue to perform research in these domains, educate our colleagues and patients on these climate impacts, and advocate for policies to proactively address the climate crisis.

#### Author agreement

The authors agree to terms and conditions of the publication.

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Tamiko R. Katsumoto reports financial support was provided by Sanofi. Titilola Falasinnu reports financial support was provided by National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases. Tamiko R. Katsumoto reports a relationship with Genentech Inc that includes: consulting or advisory. Tamiko R. Katsumoto reports a relationship with Sonoma Biotherapeutics that includes: consulting or advisory. Tamiko R. Katsumoto reports a relationship with Sanofi that includes: funding grants. If there are other authors, they declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Tamiko R. Katsumoto:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Liya Stolyar:** Writing – review & editing, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Chathurika L. Dandeniya:** Writing – review & editing, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Hong Nei Wong:** Methodology, Data curation. **Cristina M. Lanata:** Writing – review & editing. **Titilola Falasinnu:** Writing – review & editing. **Thomas Bush:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

## Supplementary materials

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