A prospective, observational clinical trial on the impact of COVID-19-related national lockdown on thyroid hormone in young males

Giulia Brigante¹,², Giorgia Spaggiari², Barbara Rossi¹,², Antonio Granata², Manuela Simoni¹,² & Daniele Santi¹,²*

Trying to manage the dramatic coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) infection spread, many countries imposed national lockdown, radically changing the routinely life of humans worldwide. We hypothesized that both the pandemic per se and the consequent socio-psychological sequelae could constitute stressors for Italian population, potentially affecting the endocrine system. This study was designed to describe the effect of lockdown-related stress on the hypothalamic-pituitary-thyroid (HPT) axis in a cohort of young men. A prospective, observational clinical trial was carried out, including patients attending the male infertility outpatient clinic before and after the national lockdown for COVID-19 pandemic. The study provided a baseline visit performed before and a follow-up visit after the lockdown in 2020. During the follow-up visit, hormonal measurements, lifestyle habits and work management were recorded. Thirty-one male subjects were enrolled (mean age: 31.6 ± 6.0 years). TSH significantly decreased after lockdown (p = 0.015), whereas no significant changes were observed in the testosterone, luteinising hormone, follicle-stimulating hormone, estradiol and prolactin serum levels. No patient showed TSH serum levels above or below reference ranges, neither before nor after lockdown. Interestingly, TSH variation after lockdown was dependent on the working habit change during lockdown (p = 0.042). We described for the first time a TSH reduction after a stressful event in a prospective way, evaluating the HPT axis in the same population, before and after the national lockdown. This result reinforces the possible interconnection between psychological consequences of a stressful event and the endocrine regulation.

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic represents the most serious health and social emergency in recent decades. At the beginning of 2020, most European countries decided to fight against the exponential spread of the infection closing non-essential recreational and productive activities, enforcing a national lockdown. In Italy, the lockdown was imposed by decree of the President of the Council of Ministers on March 8th, until the gradual reduction of the restrictive measures starting from May 4th. Thus, many citizens have experienced a radical change in their lifestyle habits for about two months. This phenomenon led to short and long term psychosocial and mental health implications. Indeed, the initial acute stress due to the fear of contagion has been superimposed on a subsequent chronic stress secondary to the limitation of freedom of movement and social life, with a complex revolution of the daily routine. Not surprisingly, the individual psychological health resulted largely affected during the national lockdown, with a documented increase in severe anxiety syndrome incidence.

It is well established that the human body activates several processes to cope psychological and/or physical stressful events, in which endocrine system plays a crucial role. Although the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal axis remains the main actor in the endocrine regulation of stress response, stress-induced alteration of the hypothalamic–pituitary-thyroid (HPT) axis has been demonstrated both in animals and in humans.

¹Unit of Endocrinology, Department of Biomedical, Metabolic and Neural Sciences, University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, via Campi 287, 41125 Modena, Italy. ²Unit of Endocrinology, Department of Medical Specialties, Azienda Ospedaliero-Universitaria of Modena, Ospedale Civile di Baggiovara, via Giardini 1355, 41126 Modena, Italy. *email: daniele.santi@unimore.it
models, a decrease in serum thyroid stimulating hormone (TSH) levels was observed in response to both acute and chronic intermittent stress, while the daily rhythm of TSH secretion resulted not impaired. On the other hand, active thyroid hormones triiodothyronine (T3) and tetraiodothyronine (T4) resulted significantly lower consequently to repeated exposure to stress. A similar HPT axis activation pattern was highlighted in humans presenting the so-called “non-thyroidal illness syndrome”. In case of acute physical stress, as observed in a large proportion of hospitalized patients, decreased serum levels of free T3 (fT3) and free T4 (fT4) accompanied by inappropriately low/normal TSH levels were recorded, as a metabolic defence mechanism. However, HPT axis modifications in response to psychological stress are even more obscure, and scantily investigated in humans. Several authors detected a T3 elevation and a modest TSH reduction in post-traumatic stress disorders in women with childhood sexual abuse, in combat veterans, and in female breast cancer patients. Similar results were recently confirmed in subjects who experienced an earthquake swarm, one year after the event, with a significant reduction in TSH levels, even more evident for the epicentre-nearest population.

With this in mind, we consider the COVID-19-related lockdown as a potential stressful event for young Italian men. In particular, this study aims to describe for the first time the effect of lockdown-related stress on the HPT axis in a cohort of young male subjects.

Materials and methods
A prospective, observational clinical trial was carried out at the Unit of Endocrinology of the Department of Biomedical, Metabolic and Neural Sciences of the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia (Modena, Italy). All patients attending the male infertility outpatient clinic before and after the first national lockdown for COVID-19 pandemic (lasting from March 8th, 2020 to May 4th, 2020) were considered eligible. The enrolment started at the end of the first lockdown when nationally-imposed restrictions on non-urgent medical activity were removed (May 4th, 2020) (Fig. 1). Originally, the study design provided the evaluation of patients every four months after the lockdown restrictions removal. However, the dramatic national situation due to the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2) spread increase forced the Italian government to impose a new quarantine the following Autumn (October 25th, 2020). Thus, we decided to close prematurely the study to avoid any possible interference of a second national lockdown on hormonal homeostasis, thus collecting only a single post-lockdown evaluation (Fig. 1). In the first phase of the study, potentially eligible patients have been selected among outpatient reports available on the Hospital Information System. All patients who attended the male infertility outpatient clinic in the six months before March 8th, 2020, i.e. the quarantine start, were evaluated for inclusion and exclusion criteria (Fig. 1). Eligible patients were males over 18 years of age with a TSH measurement performed at least once in the six months before the COVID-19 lockdown. Exclusion criteria were: (i) previous or current treatment for hypo- or hyperthyroidism, (ii) thyroid surgery history, (iii) previous metabolic radiotherapy with radioactive Iodine (Iodine-131), (iv) concomitant or previous pituitary pathology (i.e. hypopituitarism, pituitary adenoma, chromosomal or genetic disorders potentially affecting pituitary function) and (v) other serious systemic comorbidities (i.e. renal failure, hepatic failure, active or previous oncolgic disease). Hence, the study design provided a retrospective baseline visit performed within the six months before the lockdown, while the prospective follow-up visit was performed between two and four months after the lockdown end (May 4th, 2020). From the retrospective baseline visit, hormonal data about thyroid function, pituitary—gonadal axis and prolactin levels were extracted, since these parameters are routinely assessed in the work-up of male infertility. During the prospective follow-up visit, next to hormonal values, additional data regarding lifestyle habits and work management during the lockdown period were recorded by a questionnaire. During the prospective follow-up visit, next to hormonal values, additional data regarding lifestyle habits and work management during the lockdown period were recorded by a questionnaire. This questionnaire (supplementary material) did not provide a specific score, but it was used only to collect information about the pre- and post-lockdown patients' habits. During the two visits, the following hormonal parameters were recorded: TSH, testosterone, estradiol, luteinizing hormone (LH), follicle-stimulating hormone (FSH) and prolactin. FT3 and fT4 serum levels were available only in post-lockdown visit, since these hormones were not routinely measured in the infertility management in

Figure 1. Flow-chart of the study. SARS-CoV-2 = severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus-2.
(2 patients, 6.5%), and minor depression (1 patient, 3.1%). Anamnestic characteristics are summarized in Table 1.

Seven patients provided their written informed consent for the enrolment. The retrospective pre-lockdown evaluation was performed a mean of 5.6 ± 3.9 months before the restriction measures beginning, whereas the post-lockdown a mean of 3.5 ± 1.4 months after the blockage removal. In the post-lockdown, a significant TSH reduction was detected in 26 patients (83.9%) (p = 0.015), whereas no significant changes were observed in the other evaluated hormones (Table 2). The post-hoc analysis of the mean TSH difference highlighted a statistical power of 71%. No patient showed TSH serum levels above or below reference ranges, neither at baseline, nor after lockdown.

**Table 1.** Anamnestic characteristics of the 31 subjects enrolled in the study.

| Smoking habit | Baseline characteristics (n = 31) |
|---------------|---------------------------------|
| Actual smokers n (%) | 8 (25.8) |
| Number of smoked cigarettes (mean ± standard deviation) | 15.7 ± 9.7 |
| Former smokers n (%) | 8 (25.8) |
| Alcohol consumption | |
| Habitual alcohol drinkers n (%) | 26 (83.9) |
| Alcohol units daily drunk (mean ± standard deviation) | 0.94 ± 0.5 |
| Regular habitual physical activity n (%) | 12 (38.7) |

Ethical statement. Authors declare that all procedures were in accordance with the ethical standards of the Helsinki Declaration of 1975 as revised in 2013. The study protocol was approved by the Ethics Committee of "Area Vasta Emilia Nord" (protocol number: AOU0019719/20 of 15/07/2020), and all participating subjects provided their written informed consent for the enrolment.

**Laboratory methods.** TSH serum levels were measured by chemiluminescent microparticle immunoassay (Abbott Diagnostics, USA), with intra-assay coefficient of variation (CV) of 3.10% and an inter-assay CV of 3.50%. FT3 serum levels were measured by chemiluminescent microparticle immunoassay (Abbott Diagnostics, USA), with intra-assay CV of 2.80% and an inter-assay CV of 3.65%. FT4 serum levels were measured by chemiluminescent microparticle immunoassay (Abbott Diagnostics, USA), with intra-assay CV of 3.80% and an inter-assay CV of 5.70%.

Total testosterone serum levels were measured by Chemiluminescent Microparticle Immunoassay (Architect, Abbott, Dundee, UK), with inter- and intra-assay coefficients of variation (CV) of 5.2 and 5.1%, respectively. FSH and LH were measured by Chemiluminescent Microparticle Immunoassay (Architect, Abbott, Longford, Ireland) with inter- and intra-assay CV of 4.1 and 3.1% for LH, and 4.6 and 4.2% for FSH, respectively. Serum estradiol were measured by Chemiluminescent Microparticle Immunoassay on the ARCHITECT platform (Abbott Laboratories), with a sensitivity of 0.6 pg/mL. PRL was measured by Chemiluminescent Immunoassay (Beckman Coulter, Brea, CA, USA) with inter- and intra-assay CV of 4.2% and 1.6%, respectively.

**Statistical analysis.** Data distribution was evaluated by Kolmogorov–Smirnov test. Continuous data were compared before and after lockdown using ANOVA univariate analysis for normally distributed parameters and Mann–Whitney U-test for not-normally distributed parameters.

Multivariate linear regression analyses were performed considering TSH serum levels after lockdown as dependent variable and patients' age, body mass index (BMI), time elapsed after quarantine, weight change and other hormones available as independent variables. In order to identify those parameters able to predict the TSH variation after lockdown, the number of patients with a TSH decrease was calculated. This categorical variable was used as dependent variable in logistic regression analyses, using as co-variables patients age, BMI, time elapsed after quarantine and weight change after lockdown, while changes in lifestyle habits (such as smoke, alcohol and eating behaviour) were considered as cofactors. Moreover, since we recently demonstrated that TSH serum levels show an annual seasonality, we adjusted logistic regression analyses, considering the season in which the TSH measurement was performed.

Statistical analyses were performed using the ‘Statistical Package for the Social Sciences’ (SPSS) software for Windows (version 25.0; SPSS Inc, Chicago, IL). For comparisons, p < 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

**Results**

Thirty-one male subjects were enrolled, with a mean age of 31.6 ± 6.0 years. As reported above, all patients have been evaluated for couple infertility, 22 (71%) for primary and 9 (29%) for secondary infertility. Seven patients (22.6%) showed comorbidities, such as hypertension (2 patients, 6.5%), dyslipidaemia (2 patients, 6.5%), gastritis (2 patients, 6.5%), and minor depression (1 patient, 3.1%). Anamnestic characteristics are summarized in Table 1.

The retrospective pre-lockdown evaluation was performed a mean of 5.6 ± 3.9 months before the restriction measures beginning, whereas the post-lockdown a mean of 3.5 ± 1.4 months after the blockage removal. In the post-lockdown, a significant TSH reduction was detected in 26 patients (83.9%) (p = 0.015), whereas no significant changes were observed in the other evaluated hormones (Table 2). The post-hoc analysis of the mean TSH difference highlighted a statistical power of 71%. No patient showed TSH serum levels above or below reference ranges, neither before nor after lockdown. Similarly, FT3 and FT4 serum levels were within normal ranges in all patients enrolled at the follow-up visit (3.7 ± 1.7 and 9.7 ± 1.8, respectively). Moreover, no patients showed testosterone serum levels below normal range (3.0 ng/mL) or prolactin higher than reference ranges (17 ng/mL) neither at baseline, nor after lockdown.
Interestingly, no documented cases of SARS-CoV-2 infection were reported in our group of patients. Although only 5 patients (16.1%) were subjected to the nasopharyngeal swab and 9 (29%) to serological evaluation, all these diagnostic procedures resulted negative for SARS-CoV-2 infection. Only one patient (3.2%) reported a positive case in his family. During the lockdown, 14 subjects (45.2%) worked from home, whereas usual work habits changed in 6 more subjects (19.4%). Comprehensively, 20 subjects (64.5%) had to radically change their working habits during the national restriction. This period significantly impacted also the habitual lifestyle. Indeed, 9 subjects (29%) reduced their usual physical activity, 4 (12.9%) increased the number of smoked cigarettes, 5 (16.1%) increased the daily alcohol intake, and 21 (67.7%) changed their habitual eating habits. Interestingly, we recorded a significant weight increase of 1.9 ± 3.2 kg during the lockdown.

Multivariate analyses showed that TSH serum levels after lockdown were not dependent on patients’ age, BMI, time elapsed after lockdown, weight change and hormones measured (fT3, fT4, testosterone, LH, FSH, estradiol and prolactin) (p = 0.675). However, logistic regression analyses highlighted that the working habit change during lockdown significantly predict the TSH decrease after lockdown (p = 0.042) (Table 3). This result is extremely interesting, suggesting that the TSH decrease is evident mainly in those patients that had to change their work habit. These results remained significant also after adjustment for the season in which TSH was measured.

Finally, correlation analyses showed no significant correlation between continuous variables collected and TSH serum levels before and after the lockdown, suggesting that the TSH change is mainly due to other factors, such as stress.

**Discussion**

This observational prospective study demonstrates a significant decrease in TSH serum levels in young males after the restrictions and life changes imposed by the national lockdown to contain the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy. In particular, we highlight a TSH decrease of 0.6 microIU/mL after two months of lockdown, suggesting that the HPT axis is highly sensitive to stressful events in humans. We could speculate that the HPT axis activation is mediated by the sympathetic and the adrenal “fight-or-flight” system to physiologically face prolonged

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**Table 2.** Hormonal differences between pre- and post-lockdown evaluations. Data are expressed as mean ± standard deviation. Bold characters represent significantly different variables. FSH = follicle-stimulating hormone; LH = luteinizing hormone; TSH = thyroid stimulating hormone. The statistical comparison was performed by Mann–Whitney U-test.

| Reference range | Pre-lockdown | Post-lockdown | p-value |
|-----------------|--------------|---------------|---------|
| TSH (microIU/mL) | 0.35–4.94 | 2.3 ± 1.2 | 1.7 ± 0.7 | 0.015 |
| Testosterone (ng/dL) | 2.2–7.8 | 5.1 ± 1.6 | 5.1 ± 1.7 | 0.928 |
| LH (IU/L) | 1–9 | 3.9 ± 3.7 | 4.1 ± 2.6 | 0.863 |
| FSH (IU/L) | 1–12 | 6.3 ± 8.9 | 5.8 ± 3.7 | 0.796 |
| Estradiol (pg/mL) | 11–44 | 18.5 ± 10.3 | 19.1 ± 13.0 | 0.843 |
| Prolactin (ng/mL) | 3–13 | 13.2 ± 11.3 | 11.2 ± 8.9 | 0.447 |

**Table 3.** Logistic regression analyses performed considering the TSH change after national lockdown as dependent variable. Bold characters represent statistically significant results.

| Reference range | Pre-lockdown | Post-lockdown | p-value |
|-----------------|--------------|---------------|---------|
| TSH (microIU/mL) | 0.35–4.94 | 2.3 ± 1.2 | 1.7 ± 0.7 | 0.015 |
| Testosterone (ng/dL) | 2.2–7.8 | 5.1 ± 1.6 | 5.1 ± 1.7 | 0.928 |
| LH (IU/L) | 1–9 | 3.9 ± 3.7 | 4.1 ± 2.6 | 0.863 |
| FSH (IU/L) | 1–12 | 6.3 ± 8.9 | 5.8 ± 3.7 | 0.796 |
| Estradiol (pg/mL) | 11–44 | 18.5 ± 10.3 | 19.1 ± 13.0 | 0.843 |
| Prolactin (ng/mL) | 3–13 | 13.2 ± 11.3 | 11.2 ± 8.9 | 0.447 |
life-threatening situations. We recently demonstrated that an acute stressful event, such as the earthquake that occurred in northern Italy, significantly reduced TSH serum levels. However, all previous studies evaluated different clinical settings and used different methods to assess stress. Our results are limited by the small sample size, due to a resumption of the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy with further new restrictions. Moreover, the relevance of our result is limited by the lack of a control group, which is unavoidable for this topic because the whole population was subjected to the same restrictions and those who were not (i.e., health workers) were subjected to stress anyway, albeit in a different way. Moreover, we are not able to really measure the stress lived by each enrolled man. In particular, we do not use psychometric tools to objectively measure stress. However, we could speculate that the national lockdown is a stressful event that affects all young men enrolled in a comparable way. Moreover, men of couple seeking fertility are prone to chronic stress because of the difficulty to have a child. However, the stress related to infertility has not been demonstrated in male partners of infertile couples so far. And if there is, it could not be a bias for the study, since the same condition (i.e., infertility) has been maintained in both visits considered. Future studies should focus on directly quantifying the real stress weight on human well-being. Again, we cannot rule out that the TSH change discovered in our study is due to anti-thyroid antibodies or pre-existing thyroid nodular goitre, which could impair thyroid function and consequently TSH. However, the potential presence of anti-thyroid antibodies and of nodules should not have changed between the two visits considered in the study, which were temporally close to each other. Moreover, a potential stress-related activation of thyroiditis or nodules would have led to a significant change in hormonal values, up to the onset of overt hyperthyroidism which, however, we do not find in our series. Thus, future studies are needed to confirm the autoimmune activation after stressful event. Finally, many other factors could affect hormonal homeostasis, both measurable and not. However, we enrolled a homogeneous casuistry, including young men without severe comorbidities, evaluated before and after a single stressful event. Thus, possible confounding factors are reasonably affecting enrolled subjects both before and after lockdown. One important confounding factor should be COVID-19 infection itself. Previous studies demonstrated a possible hypothalamic-pituitary involvement in SARS leading to central hypothyroidism and/or central hypocortisolism. Even very recent studies on SARS-CoV-2 show a significant decrease in serum TSH levels in affected patients compared to the baseline data were collected retrospectively, a direct measurement of stress levels before and after lockdown was precluded, but we can reasonably assume that changing daily routines and new job challenges caused some degree of stress in our patients. Regarding work stress, data on the effect of difficulties resulting from the reshaping of work during the COVID-19 lockdown are not available yet. With the necessary differences, an interesting starting point could be given by the literature. Since the baseline data were collected retrospectively, a direct measurement of stress levels before and after lockdown was precluded, but we can reasonably assume that changing daily routines and new job challenges caused some degree of stress in our patients. Regarding work stress, data on the effect of difficulties resulting from the reshaping of work during the COVID-19 lockdown are not available yet. With the necessary differences, an interesting starting point could be given by the literature. Since the baseline data were collected retrospectively, a direct measurement of stress levels before and after lockdown was precluded, but we can reasonably assume that changing daily routines and new job challenges caused some degree of stress in our patients. Regarding work stress, data on the effect of difficulties resulting from the reshaping of work during the COVID-19 lockdown are not available yet. With the necessary differences, an interesting starting point could be given by the literature. Since the baseline data were collected retrospectively, a direct measurement of stress levels before and after lockdown was precluded, but we can reasonably assume that changing daily routines and new job challenges caused some degree of stress in our patients. Regarding work stress, data on the effect of difficulties resulting from the reshaping of work during the COVID-19 lockdown are not available yet. With the necessary differences, an interesting starting point could be given by the literature.
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Correspondence and requests for materials should be addressed to D.S.

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