

Mental Suffering In Women With Breast Cancer During The Covid-19 Pandemic: Integrative Review

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Abstract:

Breast cancer poses a significant challenge to public health, being the most common form of cancer among women globally. It is also one of the leading causes of disease-related mortality. Objective: To analyze the mental distress in women with breast cancer during the COVID-19 pandemic. An integrative literature review was conducted using the following databases: Medical Literature Analysis and Retrieval System Online (MEDLINE), via PubMed; Web Of Science (WOS); Literatura Latino-Americana e do Caribe em Ciências da Saúde (LILACS), via Biblioteca Virtual em Saúde (BVS); and Index To Nursing And Allied Health Literature (CINAHL), using the descriptors: women with breast cancer AND mental distress AND COVID-19. In the initial selection, according to exclusion criteria, 88 studies were eliminated. After applying both exclusion and inclusion criteria, 12 studies were eligible for analysis. As a result, there is a correlation between the diagnosis of breast cancer, the pandemic, and the significant increase in symptoms of anxiety, depression, and emotional stress. The discussed studies emphasize the importance of an approach in caring for these women that takes into account not only the medical aspects of treatment but also the psychosocial and emotional aspects. It is concluded that there is a need for future studies that include longitudinal assessment of the psychological impact on women with breast cancer during the pandemic, investigation of the effectiveness of psychosocial interventions, and exploration of protective factors associated with psychological well-being.

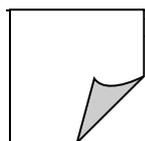
Key Word: Breast neoplasms; Depression; Covid-19.

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I. Introduction

The occurrence of breast cancer is notably prevalent in both developed and developing countries (Rodrigues et al., 2021). In the Brazilian context, it is estimated that around 57,960 new cases of the disease occur annually, with a probability of 56.2 cases per 100,000 women. Breast cancer is a complex and multifactorial condition, influenced by a series of factors that include genetic, hormonal aspects, family history,



age, lifestyle, ethnicity, infections and exposure to carcinogenic substances from the external environment (Matos; Rabelo; Peixoto, 2021).

Breast cancer (BC) is among the types of cancer most feared by women, not only due to its high incidence, but also due to the physical and psychological impacts it entails, influencing the perception of sexuality and one's own personal image. It currently represents a significant public health challenge, being the most common malignancy among women in all regions of the world (Carneiro et al., 2020).

According to Kikuti and Rodrigues (2023), there is a set of conditions that may be related to the emergence of neoplasms, whether intrinsic or extrinsic in nature. Among the intrinsic factors, age, sex, ethnicity and genetic predisposition stand out. On the other hand, inadequate eating habits, alcohol and tobacco consumption, sedentary lifestyle, exposure to environmental pollution, harmful substances and economic disparities are examples of extrinsic causes that can also contribute to the development of breast cancer.

A set of conditions, whether intrinsic or extrinsic in nature, may be associated with the development of breast cancer. Intrinsic elements such as age, gender, ethnicity and genetic predisposition play a significant role, while the use of alcohol and tobacco, physical inactivity, exposure to environmental pollution, contact with harmful agents and economic disparities are examples of extrinsic factors that can influence. Breast cancer affects women in different age groups, showing a progressive incidence curve from the age of 35 and an even more significant occurrence after the age of 50, according to data from the National Cancer Institute (Matos; Rabelo; Peixoto, 2021).

After diagnosis, women face double anguish, as Kikuti and Rodrigues (2023) point out: the fear of cancer itself, with its connotation of a terminal illness, and the possibility of having to face the loss of an organ that symbolizes motherhood, sexuality and feminine beauty. This combination of factors makes breast cancer one of the most feared diseases among women, deeply echoing the concerns of the female population.

The stage of the disease at the time of diagnosis is often decisive for the survival of cancer patients, as some treatments are only viable for tumors identified early and are more effective when started before metastatic dissemination (Carneiro et al., 2020).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, women facing breast cancer have been particularly impacted emotionally due to increased mental distress. The uncertainty surrounding access to treatments and medical appointments, along with the fear of contracting the virus during hospital visits, has exacerbated levels of anxiety and stress (Furlam; Gomes; Machado, 2023).

Many patients face loneliness resulting from social distancing, which can further worsen their emotional state, already weakened by the battle against cancer. Furthermore, the interruption or postponement of non-emergency medical procedures due to the pandemic has raised additional concerns for women with breast cancer (Silva et al., 2023).

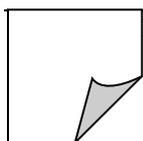
Lack of regular access to health services can result in delays in diagnosis, treatment and follow-up, leading to increased fear and distress. For some patients, this situation can create a cycle of negative thoughts and feelings of helplessness, intensifying mental and emotional suffering. The financial impact of the pandemic can also worsen the mental suffering of women with breast cancer. Many face financial difficulties due to job loss, reduced work hours, or increased medical costs related to cancer treatment (Furlam ; Gomes; Machado, 2023).

These additional financial worries can increase levels of stress and anxiety, making coping with the illness even more challenging. In the midst of all these adversities, it is crucial to offer adequate psychological and emotional support, as well as practical resources, to help women with breast cancer face this challenging period with more resilience and hope (Silva et al., 2023). In addition to what was presented above, the study aimed to analyze mental suffering in women with breast cancer during the covid-19 pandemic.

II. Material And Methods

The present study is classified as an integrative review, conducted according to the Preferred protocol guidelines Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta- Analyses (PRISMA) (Moher et al., 2009). For this, the steps proposed by Mendes, Silveira and Galvão (2008) were followed, which include: elaboration of the research question, search and selection of studies to be included in the review, definition of the characteristics of the studies, critical analysis for inclusion of studies, interpretation and discussion of results and presentation of the review in a coherent and clear way.

To prepare the starting research question, the PICO strategy was used (P: Patient, problem or population; I: phenomenon of interest; Co: Context) (Karino; Feli, 2012), where patient, problem or population (P): women with breast cancer; phenomenon of interest (I): mental suffering; Context (Co): covid-19. Contributing to the construction of the following terms: (P) – Breast Neoplasms; (I) – Depression; (Co) Covid-19. Resulting in the following question: What is the nature and extent of mental distress experienced by women diagnosed with breast cancer during the COVID-19 pandemic?



The search for studies was carried out on January 25th to 30th, 2024, in the databases: Medical Literature Analysis and Retrieval System Online (MEDLINE), via PubMed; Web Of Science (WOS); Latin American and Caribbean Literature in Health Sciences (LILACS), via the Virtual Health Library (VHL) and Index To Nursing And Allied Health Literature (Cinahl).

Initially, to search for studies, a combination of controlled (indexed in the respective databases) and uncontrolled descriptors was used as a strategy. The controlled descriptors were selected using the Health Sciences Descriptors (DeCS) and Medical Subject Headings (MeSH Terms). In order to expand the search strategy, controlled and uncontrolled descriptors were combined using Boolean operators AND and OR. It is noted that the search in the databases was carried out using the identified descriptors with an expanded meaning, without using filters, with the aim of preserving significant samples and ensuring the lowest risk of data loss.

The construction of the search strategy was carried out according to the specificities of each database, as shown in table 1.

Base	Descriptors and keywords	Number of studies found
Medline		
#1	(((((breast neoplasms[MeSH Terms]) OR (Breast Neoplasms)) OR (Breast Neoplasms[Text Word])) OR (Breast Neoplasms[Title/Abstract])) AND ((((((Depression[MeSH Terms]) OR (Depression)) OR (Depression[Text Word])) OR (Depression[Title/Abstract])) OR (Psychological Distress[MeSH Terms])) OR (Psychological Distress)) OR (Psychological Distress[Text Word])) OR (Psychological Distress[Title/Abstract])) AND ((((((COVID-19[MeSH Terms]) OR (COVID-19)) OR (COVID-19[Text Word])) OR (COVID-19[Title/Abstract])) OR (SARS-CoV-2[MeSH Terms])) OR (SARS-CoV-2)) OR (SARS-CoV-2[Text Word])) OR (SARS-CoV-2[Title/Abstract]))	53
Lilacs		
#1	(mh :(" Breast Neoplasms ") OR (" Breast Neoplasms ") AND (mh :(Depression)) OR (Depression) OR (mh :(" Anguish Psychological ") OR (" Anguish Psychological ") AND (mh :(COVID-19)) OR (COVID-19) OR (mh :(SARS-CoV-2)) OR (SARS-CoV-2)	1
Wos		
#1	((TS=("breast neoplasms") AND TS=("Depression")) AND TS=("COVID-19"))	2
Cinahl		
#1	(breast neoplasms AND depression AND covid-19)	32

Table 1: Search strategy according to each database. 2024

Source: Author's own work (2024)

In the initial phase, titles and abstracts were identified and independently assessed by two reviewers to select those that met the eligibility criteria.

Potentially relevant articles were selected by reviewing titles and abstracts. If abstracts provided sufficient data or were not available, the full article was retrieved and examined to determine whether it met inclusion criteria. Disagreements were resolved through discussion with a third reviewer. To optimize the selection of studies, the EndNote bibliographic software was used, which facilitated the organization and management of references, ensuring a systematic and comprehensive search.

In the next stage of this review, after complete reading of all included studies, data extraction was carried out using an adapted instrument, seeking information about the authors, period, year of publication, country, database, method, size of the sample and instruments used in data collection, as well as the conclusions of the studies.

The data extraction process was conducted by two researchers using the Microsoft Word® program, with the aim of synthesizing information from the studies included in the review. The quality assessment of primary studies was carried out using two instruments considered most appropriate for the methodological designs of the studies included in this integrative review. To evaluate the quality of qualitative studies, Critical Appraisal Skills Program (CASP) (CAPS, 2018). Furthermore, the Methodological Index for Non- randomized Studies (MINORS) was used to evaluate non-randomized studies. This scale consists of 12 items, each scored from zero to two, and was adapted by Slim et al. (2003).

In the first selection, carried out according to exclusion criteria, 88 studies were eliminated. After eligibility/critical evaluation of the full texts of 12 records, five met the inclusion criteria and continued to the data extraction, exhaustive reading and knowledge synthesis phase. Figure 1 represents the flowchart of the search process, according to PRISMA,

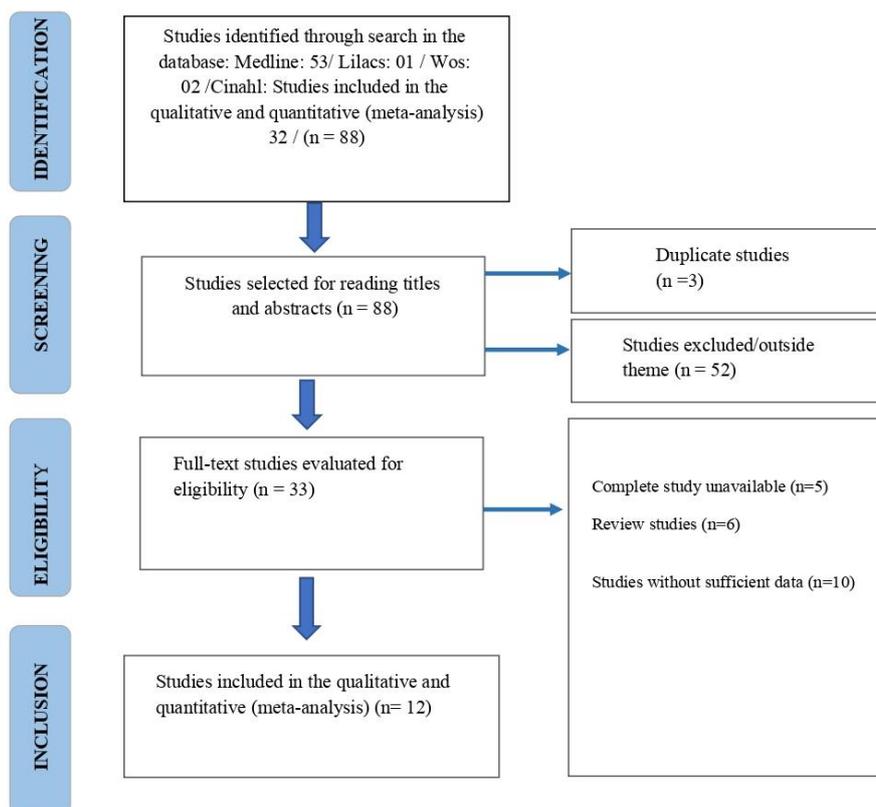


Figure 1: Flowchart of the reference identification process, as recommended by PRISMA. Brazil, 2024
Source: Author's own work (2024)

III. Result

The studies included for qualitative synthesis after the full reading process were published between 2021 and 2023. Most of the studies included in this review were retrieved from different databases, reflecting a broad search in the literature. Medline was the most used database, with 66.7% of studies found, followed by Cinahl, with 25%.

It was observed that the predominant language in the studies was English, indicating the predominance of this language in scientific research. Regarding geographic distribution, the United States was the country with the largest number of publications, representing 33.3% of the total. Other countries contributed with different proportions, such as Germany (16.7%), Turkey (8.3%), Israel (8.3%), China (8.3%), South Korea (8.3%), Indonesia (8.3%), and Italy (8.3%). Table 2 presents the synoptic summary of the studies included in the review.

No.	TITLE	AUTHORITY	BASIS	YEAR	COUNTRY	PERIODICAL
1	Stressors of the COVID-19 pandemic and psychological symptoms in breast cancer patients	Massicotte; Ivers; Savard	Medline	2021	Canada	Current Oncology
two	The Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Psychological Stress in Breast Cancer Patients	Bartmann et al.	Medline	2021	Germany	BMC cancer
3	Depression and anxiety in cancer patients before and during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic: association with treatment delays	Yildiri; Poyraz; Erdur (2021)	Medline	2021	Türkiye	Quality of Life Research
4	Psychosocial perspectives among cancer patients during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) crisis: an observational longitudinal study	Turgeman et al.	Medline	2021	Israel	Cancer Reports
5	Factors associated with psychological distress among breast cancer patients during the COVID-19 pandemic: a cross-sectional study in Wuhan, China	Chen et al.	Medline	2021	China	Supportive Care in Cancer

6	Do COVID19-related treatment changes influence fear of cancer recurrence, anxiety and depression in breast cancer patients?	Kim and Kim	Cinahl	2022	South Korea	Cancer nursing
7	Anxiety and PTSD Symptoms During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Women With Breast Cancer	Zhao; Mazanec; Rosenzweig	Cinahl	2022	USA	Oncology nursing society
8	Perspective uncertainty and emotional responses in breast cancer patients during the COVID-19 pandemic	Supriati et al.	Cinahl	2022	Indonesia	SAGE Open Nursing
9	Psychological distress in breast cancer patients during the Italian COVID-19 pandemic	Stanizzo et al.	Medline	2022	Italy	International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health
10	Determinants of physical and mental health-related quality of life among breast cancer patients during the COVID-19 pandemic	Jamil et al.	Cinahl	2023	Indonesia	Nurse Media Journal of Nursing
11	Risk Factors for Increased Anxiety Related to COVID-19 Among Breast Cancer Patients	Shah et al.	Medline	2023	USA	Cancer Medicine
12	Psychosocial Well-Being Among Breast Cancer Patients During COVID-19	Maculaitis et al.	Medline	2023	USA	Current Oncology

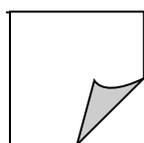
Table 2: Characterization of the articles. Brazil. 2024 (N=12).

Source: Author's own work (2024)

Of the 12 studies analyzed, 5 of them (45.45%) were evaluated with a methodological quality of 7, while another 5 (45.45%) were classified with a quality of 8. Data collection instruments varied between studies, reflecting diversity in research approaches. However, some instruments were more frequently used. The Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9) was mentioned in 2 studies, while the Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale (HADS) was used in 3 studies. The Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) and Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI) were also common, appearing in 2 studies. Other instruments included the COVID-19 Pandemic Questionnaire, the Stress and Coping Inventory (SCI) and the Mishel Disease Uncertainty Scale (MUIS), as shown in table 3.

No.	METHOD	QUALITY METHODOLOGY	SAMPLE	INSTRUMENT IN COLLECT IN DATA	CONCLUSION
1	Longitudinal study	7	36 patients	Questionnaire on COVID-19 stress factors; Insomnia Severity Index (ISI); Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale (HADS); Severity subscale of the Fear of Cancer Recurrence Inventory (FCRI).	The correlation between concerns related to the stressors experienced and the psychological symptoms mentioned was observed specifically in this group of patients. This highlights the importance of considering not only the medical aspects of breast cancer treatment, but also the psychological and emotional implications that can affect patients' quality of life.
two	Cross-sectional study	7	82 patients	COVID-19 Pandemic Questionnaire; Stress and Coping Inventory (SCI), the Distress Thermometer (DT)	The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the psychological health of the subpopulation of breast cancer patients. The application of a specific questionnaire on the COVID-19 pandemic, developed for this purpose, could be useful to identify breast cancer patients who are at greater risk of psychological distress due to the pandemic.

3	Study longitudinal	7	267 patients	Beck Depression Inventory (BDI); Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI); Treatment Deferral Analysis (TPA)	There has been a significant increase in levels of depression and anxiety among cancer patients during the pandemic. Increased levels of depression and anxiety were positively correlated with treatment discontinuation. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the mental health and treatment of cancer patients, especially among elderly, female patients.
4	longitudinal study	7	164 patients	Questionnaire demographic data, clinical variables and comorbidities; Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale (HADS) questionnaire.	Breast cancer patients undergoing intravenous therapy may experience high levels of anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially those with comorbidities such as hypertension and lung disease, or who report a lack of social support. Early identification and psychosocial support are essential to mitigate these adverse effects.
5	Cross-sectional study	8	834 patients	Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9); Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale (GAD-7); Insomnia Severity Index (ISI).	High prevalence of depression, anxiety and insomnia among breast cancer patients during the COVID-19 pandemic. Factors such as comorbidity, living alone and impact on treatment plan increase the risk of psychological distress. These patients require special attention to prevent mental disorders.
6	Cross-sectional study	7	154 patients	Online questionnaire	Moderate to severe anxiety was reported by 15% of patients, while 24.7% had moderate to severe depression. Breast cancer patients have faced changes in treatment during the pandemic, associated with increased levels of depression, anxiety and fear of cancer recurrence.
7	Cross-sectional study	8	152 patients	Economic Hardship Questionnaire; Interpersonal Support Assessment List (ISEL); Perceived Stress Scale.	Symptoms of mental distress in women with breast cancer were associated with less interpersonal support, economic hardship, and perceived stress, whereas anxiety was related only to perceived stress.
8	Cross-sectional study	8	110 patients	Mishel Disease Uncertainty Scale (MUIS); Zung Anxiety Self-Rating Scale; Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS)	Significant correlation between uncertainty and patients' emotional responses, indicating a direct impact of the pandemic on the emotions of individuals with breast cancer.
9	Retrospective observational study	7	65 patients	Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale (HADS); impact of cancer diagnosis (IES-R)	Patients experienced higher levels of anxiety and traumatic symptoms due to their cancer diagnosis. The suffering caused by COVID-19 has increased anxiety and intensified traumatic symptoms.
10	Cross-sectional study	8	260 patients	Quality of life questionnaire (HRQoL); Short Form questionnaire (SF-12)	Anxiety, depression and unemployment are associated with a lower physical and mental quality of life in breast cancer patients.



11	Cross-sectional study	8	568 participants	Anonymous and Self-reported Online Questionnaire	Moderate to extreme anxiety about contracting COVID-19 was observed in 36.5% of patients, increasing with the number of comorbidities, current diagnosis of breast cancer, and poorer coping capacity.
12	Cross-sectional study	8	669 patients	Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-8); Psychological Impact of Cancer Scale (PIC); Functional Assessment of Breast Cancer Therapy (FACT-B)	Those with metastatic breast cancer had a higher prevalence of a history of COVID-19 diagnosis, and potential depression compared to patients with early breast cancer.

Table 3: Content analysis of the articles. Brazil. 2024 (N=12).

Source: Author's own work (2024)

IV. Discussion

According to Massicotte, Ivers and Savard (2021), the correlation between stress-related concerns and psychological symptoms in breast cancer patients highlights the need to address the emotional implications of treatment. This correlation emphasizes the importance of a holistic approach to patient care, integrating not only medical aspects, but also psychological and emotional aspects. Understanding these factors can help healthcare professionals provide appropriate and personalized support to improve patients' quality of life during and after breast cancer treatment. Furthermore, it highlights the need for early and effective psychosocial interventions to deal with psychological symptoms, thus improving the general well-being of patients.

Bartmann et al. (2021) highlighted the significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the psychological health of breast cancer patients, suggesting the use of specific questionnaires to identify those at greatest risk of psychological distress. This approach can facilitate screening and referral to psychosocial support services, ensuring patients receive the support they need to deal with the emotional challenges associated with the pandemic. Furthermore, raising awareness about the psychological impacts of the pandemic can encourage the implementation of appropriate intervention and support strategies, contributing to improving the mental health of these patients.

Yildiri, Poyraz and Erdur (2021) observed an increase in levels of depression and anxiety among cancer patients during the pandemic, especially among older and female patients, highlighting the importance of psychosocial support. These findings highlight the need for specific psychological support programs for breast cancer patients, especially during times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Access to counseling and therapy services can help patients deal with emotional stress and anxiety, thus promoting better adaptation to cancer diagnosis and treatment.

Turgeman et al. (2021) mentioned that breast cancer patients undergoing intravenous therapy may experience high levels of anxiety during the pandemic, emphasizing the need for early identification and psychosocial support. Understanding the factors that contribute to these patients' anxiety, such as comorbidities and lack of social support, is crucial for developing effective interventions. Strategies that aim to reduce anxiety and improve psychological well-being, such as cognitive-behavioral therapies and support groups, may be beneficial for this group of patients.

Chen et al. (2021) identified a high prevalence of depression, anxiety and insomnia among breast cancer patients during the pandemic, emphasizing the importance of special attention to prevent mental disorders. These findings highlight the need for an integrated approach to the care of these patients, which takes into account not only the medical aspects of treatment, but also the psychosocial aspects. Promoting self-care strategies and access to psychological support services can help reduce the negative impact of the pandemic on the mental health of these patients.

Kim and Kim (2022) reported elevated levels of depression, anxiety, and fear of cancer recurrence among breast cancer patients, especially those facing treatment changes during the pandemic. These results highlight the importance of personalized approaches in the care of these patients, taking into account not only medical needs, but also individual emotional and psychological needs. Emotional support and psychotherapy strategies can be crucial in helping patients cope with the emotional challenges associated with breast cancer diagnosis and treatment during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Zhao, Mazanec and Rosenzweig (2022) highlighted the association between symptoms of mental distress and lack of interpersonal support, economic difficulties and perceived stress in breast cancer patients. These findings highlight the importance of creating social support networks and implementing financial support programs to help patients address the emotional and psychosocial challenges associated with breast cancer treatment, especially during times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. 19.

Supriati et al. (2022) found a significant correlation between uncertainty and emotional responses in breast cancer patients, indicating the direct impact of the pandemic on the emotions of these individuals. These findings highlight the importance of adaptive coping strategies and psychosocial support resources to help patients deal with the uncertainty and emotional stress associated with breast cancer diagnosis and treatment during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Stanizzo et al. (2022) observed higher levels of anxiety and traumatic symptoms among breast cancer patients, intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic. These results highlight the need for integrated approaches to the care of these patients, which address not only medical needs, but also emotional and psychological needs. Early intervention strategies and psychosocial support may be instrumental in helping patients cope with the emotional stress and traumatic symptoms associated with breast cancer diagnosis and treatment during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Jamil et al. (2023) associated anxiety, depression and unemployment with a lower physical and mental quality of life in breast cancer patients. These results highlight the importance of multidisciplinary approaches in the care of these patients, which consider not only medical aspects, but also psychosocial and economic aspects. Intervention strategies that aim to reduce emotional stress, promote psychological well-being and provide financial support may be crucial to improving the quality of life of these patients during and after breast cancer treatment.

Shah et al. (2023) identified high levels of anxiety in breast cancer patients due to fear of contracting COVID-19, especially among those with comorbidities and worse coping capacity. These findings highlight the importance of anxiety prevention and management strategies, as well as providing clear and accurate information about safety measures and infection prevention. Furthermore, they highlight the need for psychosocial support to help patients deal with the fear and anxiety associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Maculaitis et al. (2023) found a higher prevalence of potential depression among patients with metastatic breast cancer, highlighting the importance of considering not only the medical challenges, but also the psychological challenges faced by these patients. These results highlight the need for personalized approaches to the care of these patients, which consider not only medical needs, but also individual emotional and psychological needs. Psychosocial support strategies and mental health interventions may be crucial in helping patients cope with the emotional challenges associated with the diagnosis and treatment of metastatic breast cancer.

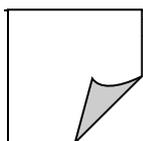
V. Conclusion

Given the analysis of mental suffering in women with breast cancer during the COVID-19 pandemic, the complexity and severity of the psychological impacts faced by these patients becomes evident. This study reveals that the correlation between the diagnosis of breast cancer, the pandemic and the increase in symptoms of anxiety, depression and emotional stress is significant. The studies discussed highlight the importance of an approach to the care of these women, which takes into account not only the medical aspects of the treatment, but also the psychosocial and emotional aspects. Early intervention strategies, access to psychosocial support services and promotion of self-care are crucial to mitigate mental suffering and improve the quality of life of these patients during this challenging period.

Future studies are suggested to include a longitudinal assessment of the psychological impact on women with breast cancer during the pandemic, investigation of the effectiveness of psychosocial interventions, exploration of protective factors associated with psychological well-being, analysis of the impact on caregivers and assessment of telemedicine in mental health.

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