

Functional tic-like behaviours during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Background:

Functional movement disorders (FMDs) are conditions in which affected patients develop abnormal movements that are incongruous with known “organic” diseases, often associated with psychological stressors or social influences. Functional tics are part of the wide spectrum of functional movement disorders. Their distinction from organic tics is challenging, because phenomenologically both functional and organic tics share common features. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of social media and websites such as Tik-Tok quickly expanded. There has also been a dramatic increase in functional tic-like behaviours (FTLBs) in vulnerable children and adolescents after social media exposure.

Methods:

We analysed clinical data (n = 240) from June 2021 to December 2021 collected at the outpatient Tourette Clinic, Child and Adolescent Neurology and Psychiatry Unit, Catania University. We compared demographic and clinical variables of patients with Tourette to patients with functional tic-like behaviours.

Results:

Among the cohort of 240 TS patients referred for evaluation at our centre, 7 were diagnosed with functional tic –like behaviours. Participants with functional tic –like behaviours were more likely female and presented a mean age of 15 years old. Patients with functional tic –like behaviours had also several characteristics including an explosive onset of complex tic-like behaviours and family-related emotional distress linked to tensions between parents and increased stress levels related to virtual schooling.

Conclusions:

Our data suggest that several features in clinical course and their phenomenology are important to differentiate functional tic –like behaviours from organic tics. Functional tic –like behaviours has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic in vulnerable children and adolescents. A prompt diagnosis and expert review when necessary is recommended as these patients generally do not respond to conventional pharmacotherapies for tics.