Is it Rheumatoid Arthritis or Osteoarthritis?

by ANGELA FINLAY

The Difference Between RA and Other Forms of Arthritis

Many people think of arthritis as a disease that hits later in life, but that's only one part of the story. In fact, arthritis is a broad category that contains over 100 conditions, and some of these have very little to do with the natural degeneration that comes with age.

Rheumatoid arthritis is one good example: it can strike well before old age, and although it does bear some resemblance to other types of arthritis, there are also some very important differences.

While all arthritis involves some degree of discomfort, rheumatoid arthritis has a very particular set of symptoms that demands a very precise management plan. Without targeted treatment, RA can quickly cause permanent damage to your joints, and even lead to serious complications in other areas of the body.

The first step to better arthritis care is an accurate diagnosis, so it is important to learn how and why RA stands apart from other arthritic conditions.

How Different Forms of Arthritis Affect Your Body

In general terms, arthritis involves the destruction or disintegration of joints, bones, cartilage and connective tissues. Pain, stiffness and inflammation are common complaints as the joints and muscles begin to lose function, and your range of motion and mobility will eventually suffer.

Different types of arthritis will affect your joints, cartilage and membranes in different ways. Although every type of arthritis brings its own set of challenges, many fall into one of the following broad categories:

- **Degenerative –** The most common type of degenerative arthritis is osteoarthritis, and it's often brought on by wear and tear or injury. It tends to develop later in life (after the joints have been taxed for many years), but since athletes and overweight people demand more of their joints than an average healthy person, they may notice signs of OA at a younger age.

- **Autoimmune –** These forms of arthritis emerge when the body's immune response goes into overdrive. Lupus, psoriatic arthritis, and rheumatoid arthritis all fall under this category. In an autoimmune form of arthritis, the body attacks healthy tissue – the joints, muscles, or organs, depending on the specific condition – which causes inflammation and interferes with normal function.
- **Inflammatory –** Many forms of arthritis can be described as inflammatory as well as degenerative or immune-related, but some are more strictly tied to inflammation brought on by trauma or unhealthy lifestyle. Gout, Lyme disease, and reactive arthritis are examples of arthritic conditions that are triggered by a specific event or series of lifestyle choices that disrupt healthy function.

Osteoarthritis vs Rheumatoid Arthritis

Osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis are the two most common forms of arthritis, and they are often confused. However, OA and RA have different sources, risk factors, and patterns.

- **Inflammation vs degeneration –** RA inflames the membrane that protects and lubricates the joints (the synovium), while osteoarthritis wears away the cartilage that covers the ends of the bones in the joint. One is an autoimmune disease, and the other is a degenerative disease that does not involve the immune system at all.The inflammation of RA comes from an autoimmune response: the body mistakes the synovium for a harmful invader, and attacks the area with fluid as it would attack a virus. It's this buildup of fluid that causes the painful swelling and stiffness around the joint. The pain and inflammation of osteoporosis comes when the cartilage wears down enough to allow the bones to rub together.
- **Genes vs lifestyle –** Those who suffer from obesity, diabetes, or gout are far more likely to develop osteoarthritis than the rest of the population, but your chances of developing are RA are generally not affected by your other health conditions (aside from smoking). Instead, RA tends to run in families, so if any of your immediate relatives suffer from it, you have an increased chance of developing RA yourself.
- **Symmetrical vs one-sided symptoms –** Rheumatoid arthritis symptoms tend to occur in the same place on both sides of the body: if you experience joint stiffness in the fingers on your left hand, you will likely also experience it in your right hand. Although OA hits some of the same sites as RA, it won't progress in both sides of the body simultaneously like RA does.

RA Symptoms and Osteoarthritis Symptoms

RA symptoms can certainly resemble OA symptoms, and that can complicate diagnosis. Both OA patients and RA sufferers complain about specific discomforts in the joints, such as:

- Throbbing pain
- Warmth and tenderness
- Morning stiffness
- Worsening range of motion

On the other hand, RA can bring other symptoms that aren't seen in many other forms of arthritis. For instance, the disease doesn't always target the joints first – in some cases, the symptoms are more vague and widespread before the characteristic joint pain and inflammation begins. In the start, you may feel:

- Low-grade fever
- Fatigue
- Muscle aches

As the disease progresses, rheumatoid nodules may form underneath the skin near the joints. Around one in five people with RA will develop these small, sore lumps, and along with the severe swelling and stiffness in the joint itself, they can make RA severely uncomfortable to manage.

Finding the Right Treatment for Your Arthritis

If left untreated, arthritis will almost certainly interfere with your daily life. However, certain arthritis conditions – including RA – can bring a host of complications along with the pain and swelling. In order to prevent debilitating fatigue, fever, rash, and damage to the heart or lungs, you need to control the inflammation before it spreads beyond the joints.

Anti-inflammatory medications and corticosteroids can treat both osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis, but you will need to include disease-modifying drugs to calm the damaging immune response of RA. The goal for both conditions is to reduce pain and inflammation, but for those with RA, that can mean more trips to the doctor, closer monitoring, and frequent adjustments to medication.

If you suspect that your arthritis may have been misdiagnosed, consult with a doctor or rheumatologist as soon as

you can. The sooner you get on the right treatment track, the better your chances of protecting your joints and maintaining mobility for many years to come.