When Rheumatoid Arthritis Gives You a Headache

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How to Cope With a Rheumatoid Arthritis Headache

If you live with rheumatoid arthritis (RA), you likely suffer from headaches. Here is what you need to know about RA-related headaches, including symptoms, causes, and rheumatoid arthritis headache relief.

Prevalence of Rheumatoid Arthritis Headaches

Research from the International Journal of Headache, *Cephalalgia*, finds up to 17% of people with RA experience headaches. The headache study compared headaches in people with lupus to people with RA, so it is likely headache prevalence in people with RA is much higher than the sample size.

Researchers have confirmed a connection between chronic pain and headaches. In 2013, researchers from the University of São Paulo. Ribeirão Preto, São Paulo, Brazil and the Central Hospital of Maputo, Mozambique, analyzed the prevalence and nature of the headaches in people with chronic pain conditions, such as RA.

What they found is headaches are frequent in people living with chronic pain and affected up to 45% of the study participants. And even though a headache was not the primary source of pain, it was a second major type for many of the study subjects. Migraines affected 11.9% of the patients, tension headache affected 23.8%, and cervicogenic headache affected 7.6%. Cervicogenic headaches result from cervical spine conditions that affect bony areas, discs or soft tissues.

Research shows RA patients with cervical spine involvement have neurological symptoms and headaches. Your cervical spine includes the small spine bones closest to the skull and going down your neck and back.

Many RA patients aren’t even aware of their cervical spine involvement, and recent research from the New York Medical College, Hawthorne, New York, US, shows up to 80 percent have spine involvement, which is visible on x-rays within two years of diagnosis. Chronic inflammation is to blame.

Occipital headaches are the most common type of a headache in RA patients with spine involvement, and they tend to be related to nerve compression in occipital nerves. The occipital nerves are sensory nerve roots, and when pinched, cause pain that runs from the top of the spinal cord up to the scalp.

Can Rheumatoid Arthritis Cause Headaches?

The type of headaches associated with RA include migraines, tension headaches, and occipital headaches. While all cause head pain, they differ in other symptoms and their causes.

Migraines

Migraine headaches cause deep throbbing from deep inside your head. Pain can last for days and limit your

ability to do the things you usually do.

Migraines are typically one-sided and make you sensitive to sounds and lights. They may also cause nausea and vomiting.

Auras often precede migraines. These are temporary symptoms that include a tingling feeling on one side of your face and visual disturbances, such as seeing blind spots, stars, and zig-zag lines.

It is important to note symptoms of stroke may mimic migraines, so if you have not previously had these symptoms, seek out medical attention.

Migraines are heredity or associated with neurologic and pain conditions. Women and people with post-traumatic stress disorder are at an increased risk for migraines.

Triggers of migraines include sleep disruption, dehydration, hormone fluctuations, certain foods, skipping meals and exposure to chemicals, including household cleaners and perfumes.

Tension Headaches

When you have a tension headache, you usually feel a dull, achy sensation throughout your entire head, but your head is not throbbing. You may also experience tenderness in your neck, forehead, scalp and shoulders.

Tension headaches tend to be triggered by stress. In people with RA, they are might also be triggered by pain and other RA symptoms, including fatigue.

Occipital Headaches

Occipital headaches cause localized pain in the back, around or over the top of the head. Pain may also be felt up to the eyebrows and behind the eyes.

The pain associated with these headaches is often severe, beginning in the upper neck and in the back of the head. The pain can be described as sharp, stabbing and shooting.

These headaches are often one-sided but can affect both sides of the head. If the pain radiates to the back of the eyes, you may have blurred vision.

These headaches can last for hours or days. They may even come and go.

Other symptoms associated with these headaches include:

- Sensitivity to lights and sounds
- Slurred speech
- Difficulty with balance and correlation
- Tender scalp
- Nausea
- Vomiting

How to Prevent Rheumatoid Arthritis Headaches

There many steps you can take to manage RA headaches easier. These may ultimately lead to less pain.

Manage Stress

It is possible the reason you get headaches because of stress. Stress management techniques, including meditation, yoga, deep breathing, and exercise can help reduce the number of headaches you have.

Stay Hydrated

With or without RA, people who do not consume enough fluids can get headaches. Make sure you are drinking at least six glasses of water per day and limiting your caffeine and alcohol intake.

Get Enough Sleep

RA joint pain and stiffness can interrupt your sleep, and the lack of sleep increases your risk for headaches. Consider cutting back on caffeine, especially close to bedtime, and get regular exercise to relax your mind and body, and to help you to sleep better and wake up feeling refreshed.

Avoid Staring at Screens for Too Long

Spending too much time front of the computer can trigger headaches. If you work in front of a computer, take breaks every half hour to get away from the screen for at least a few minutes.

Avoid Cigarette Smoke

Cigarette smoke contributes to headaches because it constricts blood vessels in the brain. If you are a smoker, quitting can reduce and relieve headaches, and if you are not a smoker, avoid secondhand smoke as much as possible.

Check Your Medications

If you take pain relievers for headaches that last for days or if headaches consistently return, you should ask your doctor if the headaches might be a side effect of your treatments. It is also possible headache might be a new symptom, especially if RA affects your shoulders, neck, or spine.

Try Omega-3s

Fish oil has many health benefits, although the research shows any benefit is modest at best.

Fish oil can reduce inflammation and swelling, so it may also help in reducing head pain and other headache symptoms. Moreover, daily intake of fish oil supplements can reduce frequency and severity of headaches, this according to research from the University of Cincinnati, Ohio, USA.

The Takeaway

For many people with RA, headache pain interferes with quality of life and makes living with RA even harder.

Sleep problems, stress, dehydration, hormones, and exposures to chemicals and odors are triggers. Inflammation of the cervical spine is a common cause of headaches in some RA patients.

You can reduce the number of headaches you get by managing triggers and RA inflammation, and with fish oil supplements.

If headaches are interfering with your life, and making it hard to work and manage daily activities, and over the counter pain relievers aren’t helping, make sure you prioritize talking to your rheumatologist or other treating doctor.