The Link Between RA and Cognitive Troubles

by BRENDA VANTA

Rheumatoid Arthritis and Brain Fog

Brain fog is a term that describes cognitive dysfunction like decreased ability to think and learn new things, increased memory loss and trouble performing various mental tasks. While RA primarily affects the joints, researchers say there is a connection between rheumatoid arthritis and brain fog.

Research

Brain fog often goes undiagnosed, yet is experienced by as many as 30 - 71 % of RA suffers, according to studies. During these studies participants received standard cognitive tests, and researchers found that the participants with RA had poor performance on some cognitive tests.

A 2012 study involving over 100 subjects diagnosed with RA featured in the journal *Arthritis Care and Research* further confirmed these findings: as many as 31% of the participants had poor scores on four or more of 16 various measurements that assessed cognitive ability.

Researchers suggest that the corticosteroid medication many RA sufferers take may play a role, as most patients who experienced brain fog were taking this drug to manage symptoms of RA. Those individuals who had high blood pressure and high cholesterol levels in the blood (and therefore at risk for heart diseases) were also more likely to have cognitive problems.

Another possible explanation is that chronic pain associated with RA increases the risk of depression and anxiety, which can lead to cognitive dysfunction – especially troubles with planning, memory and making decisions. Pain also has an impact on your sleep and energy levels, which can further aggravate the cognitive issues.

Managing Brain Fog

Don’t ignore the symptoms, hoping they will go away. Talk to your doctor about your brain fog. Having your RA symptoms well controlled is important, so you can function at your best. If you have high blood pressure, and high cholesterol levels, they should also be well managed.

M. Rissenberg, neuropsychologist suggests that working memory is one of the most affected cognitive processes in cases of chronic inflammatory conditions. When the working memory is affected you may have troubles holding information in your mind, keeping track of what you say or read or do, leading to confusion, disorientation, forgetting things and feeling “lost”. Furthermore, Rissenberg recommends few easy techniques to improve your working memory:

- **Use a calendar or journal.** Write down everything important in your calendar or journal and make sure you check it frequently
- **Make a plan.** At the beginning at the day, and again at the end of it (so twice daily), take some time and

get your “to do “list organized. Also note if you have some tasks that can be delayed to the next day, in case you have a really bad, “foggy” day.

- **Have a routine.** Choose a specific time of the day (or a day of the week) and do as many tasks /activities as possible. When you have a routine, you don’t have to remember so many things, because those tasks become automatic, like a habit.
- **Pay attention to your feelings.** Brain fog tends to fluctuate. If you notice a pattern, for example you have more problems in the morning, and your mind is clearer in the afternoon, you may want to arrange your schedule accordingly. Take some time to rest and relax when your memory is poor, and work more when your mind functions better.