Coping With the Development and Progression of Rhuematoid Arthritis

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RA Development and Progression

Were you recently diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis (RA)? Learning as much as you can about RA can help you better manage the symptoms, know what to expect, and how to organize your life to live as healthy and independently as possible. After diagnosis, it's common for people to wonder why RA develops and how it will progress over time — let's take a look.

The Development of RA

RA is a chronic, inflammatory arthritis affecting the small joints, such as those in your hands and wrists. However, unlike osteoarthritis, RA can also affect other organs besides the joints, like the skin, eyes, lungs, heart and nerves.

The most common symptoms of RA include joint pain and swelling, stiffness and fatigue. However, RA affects everyone differently: some will notice joint symptoms developing gradually over the years, others will experience symptoms quickly, and some only experience flare-ups and periods of remission.

RA is an autoimmune disease, meaning your immune system attacks your own tissues, perceiving them as foreign or dangerous. Factors such as genetics, environment and hormones may play a role in RA's development, but as with most autoimmune diseases, the cause is unclear.

This condition is more common in women, although men have typically more severe forms of RA if they develop it. And don't think RA is only for older people — it can also be seen in young children, teenagers and adults.

The Progression of RA

For most people, RA will progress over time. The progression is influenced by certain factors, such as the severity of disease at the time of diagnosis and how active it is (how many flare-ups you have). Symptoms and progression can vary from person to person.

- **Some experience long periods of remission when the symptoms are very mild or completely gone.** As many as 10 percent of people with RA will have a sudden development of symptoms, followed by remission for many years.
- **Intermittent symptoms occur in about 15 percent of cases.** There will be periods of time with flare-ups, alternating with periods with very few or no symptoms.
- **Many people experience progressive RA.** As the name implies, RA progresses over time and treatment has to be adjusted to better control the symptoms and slow down the progression. You are more likely to have progressive RA if you have very intense and long flare-ups, if you were diagnosed when you were young, if you have nodules (bumps under skin), if blood tests show active inflammation, and X-rays show significant joint damage.

How to Manage the Progression of RA

- **Take a proactive role in your health.** Take the Health Assessment Questionnaire, which is a great tool to track RA progression. Get a copy of your results and recheck periodically.
- **See your doctor regularly.** Have them assess your symptoms, review the results of the HAQ, order tests, and adjust your treatment.
- **Don’t ignore your emotions, feelings and stress levels, as they can trigger an RA flare-up.** See a therapist to improve your mental health.
- **Stay as active as you can.** Exercise can help keep your joints strong, while decreasing the levels of inflammation in your body long term.
- **Eat healthy.** Avoid processed foods and consume fresh vegetables and fruits, whole grains, lean meats and fish.