The Link Between Rheumatoid Arthritis and Migraines

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RA and Migraines: Is There a Connection?

Many people with RA suffer from chronic headaches or migraines. In fact, there is a strong crossover between people who experience chronic migraines and headaches and those who have some form of chronic illness. Therefore, if you experience RA and migraines together, you are by no means alone.

What's the Difference Between a Migraine and a Headache?

While headaches can be quite severe and limit your ability to perform daily tasks and activities, there are a few key differences between migraines and headaches. A migraine is described as a throbbing pain at the front or the side of the head.

Migraines, however, aren't just limited to pain in the head. Migraine symptoms also include nausea, vomiting, sensitivity to light and sound, clamminess in the hands and feet, cold sweats, blurred vision and other gastrointestinal issues like diarrhea.

Many migraine sufferers know when one is coming because they experience an aura. Each person's aura is different, but it may include feeling clammy, fatigue, craving specific foods, depression, irritability, stiff muscles, numbness in extremities, feeling of pins and needles and visual disturbances. The visual disturbances may present themselves as seeing zig zags, blurred vision or partial (temporary) blindness.

A migraine may last for one hour to three days. After the migraine is over, many people report that they feel "hungover." In this phase, the intense pain is gone, but cognitive difficulties, feeling weak, fatigued, soreness where the migraine pain was and GI issues may persist for several days.

One key difference between headaches and migraines is that migraines do not respond to over-the-counter pain relief tablets or other medication for general headaches. In light of the GI symptoms of migraines, the body will often expel it anyway. Frequent migraines can be treated with a range of painkillers and anti-sickness medication. However, there is no cure for migraines, and unfortunately, most people have to "tough it out."

What Causes Rheumatoid Arthritis-Related Migraines?

Now that you have an understanding of the relationship between RA and migraines, and the difference between headaches and migraines, it's time to identify the causes and find ways to manage future migraines.

Medication

Many people with RA may experience migraines as something unrelated to their RA, though there may be some correlation. One thing to check for if you suffer from migraines is your medication. Migraines can be a side effect of a few medicines used to treat RA, and too many NSAIDs can lead to what is called a "rebound headache."

Taking a break from these meds or trying to manage your pain in a different way may lead to a reduction of migraines.

You can also speak to your doctor about the medications that you're on. Although not very common, at times medications used to treat RA can lead to side effects like migraines. Since everyone's body is very different, everyone is going to react differently to the medication they take.

It may be worth it to find out if there is a medication you can switch to that doesn't have the same (literal) headache attached to it but takes care of your RA symptoms.

Stress

It is almost ridiculous to tell someone with RA that they have too much stress. You're probably well versed in the health issues, money troubles and household management problems you face alongside attempting to manage pain and illness.

However, stress management can play a crucial role in reducing migraines. If you can, try to take some time out every week just for yourself. This may mean sleeping in, relaxing in the tub or engaging in some meditation or aromatherapy. Any time you can get yourself to relax, even just for half an hour, can really make all of the difference.

Inactivity

Exercising with RA sometimes seems like a total impossibility, and sometimes it is. But in reality, it is a vicious cycle as inactivity can make RA symptoms worse, making you less likely to want to get out and exercise. Inactivity, however, contributes greatly to RA symptoms and if you're suffering from migraines, this can mean more of them.

Try getting active with a slow paced 30-minute walk every day, which can also contribute greatly to lowering your stress levels. Other activities that aren't so hard on the joints include riding a bike or using an elliptical machine on a low setting. Swimming is also a great way to get in cardio exercise without putting unwanted pressure on the joints.

Ease yourself into an exercise routine slowly and don't get upset with yourself if it is difficult at first. Listen to your body and take breaks when and if you need to!

Extra Medication and Consulting with Your Doctor

Although this isn't preferable for most people with RA, as you're already likely taking a whole load of them (and each with their own side effects!), sometimes this is one of the only routes you can go down. Your doctor can prescribe you medication to take during migraine "attacks" and you can also be referred to a specialist who can help you nip the problem in the bud.

It may be related to your RA, but it may be something totally different. A specialist can help you sort out the problem and hopefully relieve, if not eliminate, some of the migraine symptoms.

Tips for Coping During a Migraine

As you may well know, experiencing a migraine is wholly unpleasant. If you're having a migraine, unless you have medication from a doctor specifically to target them, there is very little that can be done to lessen or stop it from occurring.

When one does occur, you'll need to cancel all of your plans for the rest of the day and the next day as well (to avoid the risk of the migraine continuing or experiencing a "hangover" while you have other responsibilities). Lie down in a dark, silent room away from everyone else.

A cold rag on your forehead may help. Drink plenty of water and have a bowl nearby in case you have to vomit, as this can come on very suddenly. Do not turn on the television or radio or allow others to do so in the room as this can make it exponentially worse.

Instead, concentrate on relaxing and try to sleep (if you are able). If the migraine becomes unbearable or is worse than any other migraine you've had before, it is wise to go to the emergency room as there may be something else going on.