A Holistic Approach to RA Treatment Could Bring Better Relief

by LANA BARHUM

Natural Treatment for Rheumatoid Arthritis

The best way to manage and treat rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is with disease-modifying anti-rheumatic drugs (DMARDs). While there are no non-medicinal substitutes for DMARDs, some complementary therapies can give you relief from joint stiffness, swelling and pain.

Keep in mind, however, that these therapies do not stop inflammation, joint damage and long-term complications of RA.

Complementary Therapies Defined

Complementary therapies are therapeutic practices used together with conventional medicine. Examples of complementary therapies include acupuncture, chiropractic medicine, meditation, and nutrition.

Research has shown complementary therapies are highly effective for RA and researchers are continually looking for ways to incorporate these with medicinal treatments.

Dietary Supplements

While supplements are popular for managing RA pain and inflammation, there hasn't been enough scientific research to back up their effectiveness.Two supplements, however, have solid research behind them for being successful in managing RA pain.

Fish oil may reduce your need for non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) and disease-modifying anti-rheumatic drugs (DMARDs), this according to a report out of Albany Medical College. RA patients in several studies who received fish oil supplements, in addition to their DMARDs and NSAIDs, were reporting fewer tender joints and less morning stiffness and their blood work also showed lower inflammation markers.

If you are taking medications that affect clotting, check with your doctor before taking fish oil supplements.

Low vitamin D and RA seem to go together — there has been a lot of evidence that low vitamin D triggers RA development and worsens symptoms in people who already have the condition.

If you think your vitamin D levels are low, ask your doctor to check them and recommend a supplement, if needed. You will need at least 600 IU of vitamin D daily, according to the National Institutes of Health.

Manipulative Body-Based Therapies

Manipulative body-based therapies involve manipulation of one or more body parts to address systematic imbalances of the bones and joints, soft issues and the circulatory system. Practices include acupuncture,

therapeutic massage, and electromagnetic therapy.

Acupuncture is an ancient Eastern practice where thin needles are inserted in the skin at specific points in the body to promote energy flow.

A 2008 study found that RA patients were showing improvement in morning stiffness after 10 weeks of acupuncture treatments. However, the results were mixed for improvements in joint swelling or inflammation.

Therapeutic massage may give you pain relief and improve your range of motion and grip, this according to a report published in the May 2013 issue of *Complementary Therapy in Clinical Practice*.

Forty-two adults with RA were randomly assigned moderate pressure or light pressure massage therapy. The therapists massaged affected arms and shoulders for four weeks and taught the participants self-massage.

The study participants reported relief from pain and stiffness, stronger grip, and greater range of motion from the moderate-pressure massage and daily self-message. Participants given the light pressure massage showed improvements in pain and stiffness only.

Electromagnetic therapy uses magnets to manage pain, inflammation and a variety of other health conditions. Research on electromagnetic energy has been mixed and the practice has not been approved by the FDA. However, there has been no evidence of negative complications in using magnet therapy.

Mind/Body Practices

Mind-body practices can help you address RA pain, stress and sleep issues.

Mediation is the practice of focused awareness where you intentionally focus your attention and keep that attention. The main goal is mindfulness — a state of awareness.

Mindfulness promotes relaxation to reduce pain, supports healthy behaviors, and increases spiritual insight. The ability to calm your body may result in fewer inflammatory hormones which equals less joint pain.

Other mind-body practices you can try are yoga, tai chi, spiritual belief and hypnosis. Any and all of these practices can help you manage your emotional, mental, social, and behavioral struggles of living with RA.

Exercise

You should get plenty of exercise to help you cope with RA. Exercise will help ease joint pain and stiffness, make you more flexible, boost your muscle endurance, give you energy, and improve your sleep.

Your exercise program should include range of motion exercises, strength training, and aerobic exercises.

Range of motion exercises, generally part of physical therapy, address specific joints and help if you have been inactive in the past, have restricted joint and muscle motion and if you are recovering from joint surgery.

Strength training will help you improve muscle strength and function. Strong muscles provide better joint support and reduce stress on your joints.

Aerobic exercises improve heart, lung and muscle functions, and help with weight control, mood and sleep. Safe aerobic exercises you can try include walking, dance, swimming, biking, or using exercise equipment, such as treadmills and stationary bikes.

Your daily tasks and leisure activities can count towards aerobic exercises if carried out at moderate strength levels. Examples are playing golf, walking the dog, or doing yard work.

Diet

The connection between RA and diet is quite complex, but diet does influence your RA symptoms. A diet of anti-inflammatory foods can decrease your symptoms, whereas a diet filled with junk and processed foods can promote inflammation and worsen pain.

Gluten-free, anti-inflammatory, and Mediterranean diets have been helpful to RA patients.

Gluten is found in grains like wheat, barley and rye. It is possible your joint pain, stiffness, and swelling is related to gluten sensitivity and eliminating these foods may improve symptoms.

An anti-inflammatory diet promotes certain foods to minimize inflammation, including more plant-based foods, such as fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. Lean meats and low-fat dairy would be a one-third of your diet and you should avoid processed and junk foods, and excessive carbohydrates.

Last, get more omega-3 foods, such as fatty fish and certain types of oils, and foods high in antioxidants, such as beans.

The Mediterranean diet is high in foods considered anti-inflammatory. Like the anti-inflammatory diet, it consists of mostly fruits and vegetables, whole grains, extra-virgin olive oil, and fatty fish.

While there has been little scientific evidence to support that specific foods help RA, you can still manage RA symptoms by eating more good foods and removing bad ones from your diet. You should talk to your doctor about changing your overall diet to a healthy rheumatoid arthritis diet.

Complementary Therapies Are Generally Safe

There is not enough evidence to prove complementary therapies work for RA and there is always safety concerns. But, for the most part, most complementary therapies are safe and could help you to manage your symptoms and pain.

Just be sure to discuss the ones you would like to try with your doctor.