Protecting the Heart During RA Treatment

by ANGELA FINLAY

Cardiovascular Risk

Cardiovascular disease and rheumatoid arthritis might seem like unrelated conditions, but there is a definite link between them: within the first 10 years, rheumatoid arthritis almost doubles the risk of cardiovascular events. Like high cholesterol or diabetes, RA is a risk factor for heart disease.

Luckily, there are several ways for RA sufferers to control the danger and reduce the chance of a coronary event. From medical monitoring to lifestyle changes, you can adopt a range of measures to protect your heart while you control your arthritis symptoms.

How Heart Disease Relates to Rheumatoid Arthritis

While RA primarily inflames the joints, experts agree that the disease can also cause inflammation elsewhere in the body, including the lining of the coronary arteries. When those arteries become inflamed, they swell and begin to trap plaque, which can disrupt blood flow to the heart and cause a serious cardiovascular event.

Other aspects of rheumatoid arthritis can affect the heart as well, namely certain common medications for treating RA pain and inflammation. Steroids such as prednisone and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, like ibuprofen, can stress the cardiovascular system and have adverse effects on the heart. On the other hand, common DMARDs used to curb the progression of rheumatoid arthritis can reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease, so there’s a good opportunity to strike a heart-healthy balance in your treatment plan.

Clinical Steps to Reduce the Risk of Cardiovascular Disease

There are several techniques doctors can use to monitor and lower heart disease risk in RA patients, including:

- Cardiovascular risk calculators to determine your risk level. Systematic Coronary Risk Evaluation, or SCORE, is an effective tool for most RA cases.
- Annual screening for cardiovascular disease, along with appropriate attention to any new symptoms.
- Medication to reduce blood pressure and lower cholesterol (if needed).
- Ongoing treatment to reduce the inflammation of RA, which will diminish the chance of inflammation in coronary arteries.

Since each RA case is unique, your doctor will want to consider your age, family history and your medical history to tailor testing and treatment. It’s important to establish control over your rheumatoid arthritis right away since studies show that cardiovascular disease is much more prevalent in severe RA cases than in mild to moderate cases.

Lifestyle Changes to Protect the Heart

While medication and testing are indispensable tools, lifestyle changes are just as important for RA sufferers. Some simple changes can bring significant results:

- Get more exercise. The more you work your heart and muscles, the better your cardiovascular system will work for you. Regular exercise also keeps your joints moving, which will reduce stiffness and maintain your range of motion. Even a short daily walk is a move in the right direction.
- Heart-healthy foods are essential in an RA diet. Avoid fatty and processed foods, and focus instead on fruits, vegetables and lean meats. There's another bonus to eating for heart health: many of these whole foods have anti-inflammatory properties that can ease your RA symptoms, especially walnuts, fish, ginger and spices.
- Quit smoking and drink less alcohol. Both substances cause inflammation, but they can also lead straight to heart problems. The first step to restoring balance in the body is to replace destructive habits with healthy habits.

It can be difficult to be proactive when you're dealing with pain, so adjust your plan as needed. In the long run, regular activity, a good diet and attentive treatment will almost certainly lower your risk of cardiovascular disease, so do what you can when you feel you are able.