6 Things People With RA Wish Everyone Understood

by MARIAH LEACH

Understanding RA

Much to the frustration of those of us who live with rheumatoid arthritis every day, there are many misconceptions associated with the word "arthritis."

Many are confused about what arthritis is, who can be affected, the life complications of arthritis, and how it can impact someone's daily life. This limited understanding of what RA is can often lead to well-meaning but ill-informed comments.

1. All "Arthritis" Isn't The Same

Arthritis is used to describe more than 100 different diseases and conditions that affect joints, bones, cartilage, and other tissue.

The literal meaning of arthritis is joint inflammation and is a symptom many of arthritis conditions share. However, various types of arthritis cases can be entirely different.

The most common type of arthritis is osteoarthritis (OA), which occurs when there is a breakdown of cartilage over time resulting in pain, inflammation, and potential damage to a particular joint.

RA, on the other hand, is a severe systemic autoimmune disease. A person's immune system is designed to protect them by attacking foreign cells, but in people with autoimmune diseases, the immune system mistakenly attacks healthy tissue instead.

In people with RA, their immune system can attack any joint in the body or many at once.

There are also other types of autoimmune arthritis:

- Juvenile arthritis (JA)
- Psoriatic arthritis (PsA)
- Ankylosing spondylitis (AS)
- Gout

2. Arthritis Can Happen At Any Age

Arthritis is commonly associated with senior citizens. The origin of this stereotype is the fact that OA is caused by wear and tear on the joints over time and often worsens with age, but this age stereotype does not hold true for other types of arthritis.

RA most commonly begins between the ages of 30 and 60, but can indeed occur earlier or later in life.

Despite the stereotype that only old people have arthritis, the Arthritis Foundation reports that in the U.S., two-thirds of the people living with arthritis are younger than 65 and 300,000 of them are children.

3. RA Is More Than A Little Joint Pain

RA can cause permanent damage to joints and related structures like bones and cartilage, serious mobility issues, and debilitating fatigue.

It can affect a person's vision or increase the risk for significant systemic complications, including:

- Lung diseases
- Cardiovascular disease
- Osteoporosis
- Infection

In addition to physical impacts, RA can have significant emotional and social implications that can negatively influence a person's quality of life.

4. Medications Have Risks, But So Does Untreated RA

RA is one of the more severe types of arthritis, and it requires the use of strong medications to manage the progression of the condition.

While there are certain rheumtaoid arthritis medications associated with risks and side effects, the development of these medications has transformed RA from a disease that resulted in permanent disability and deformity to one where people living with RA can lead full and healthy life.

Making sure RA is properly managed is essential for preventing permanent damage, and unsolicited criticism directed towards the medical choices of someone living with RA may make it more difficult for them to take the medications they need.

5. Pain Can Be Invisible

As we all learned as kids, we should never judge a book by its cover – and the same goes for people living with RA.

Someone with RA may not show any noticeable signs of pain or fatigue, but how they look does not necessarily communicate how they feel.

RA is an invisible illness, so a person who looks perfectly healthy may be in much pain or struggling with intense fatigue. Additionally, since RA can fluctuate in severity from day to day, a person's abilities can sometimes vary wildly as the disease flares.

Recognizing that people living with RA may not be feeling their best can help relieve some of the emotional burdens they are experiencing.

6. Lifestyle Changes Are Not A Cure

While lifestyle changes can certainly help a person adapt to living a better life with RA, they are by no means a cure.

Exercises are an essential tool for managing RA, but it can be difficult or even impossible during flares, and in some cases may lead to additional joint damage.

Taking supplements may be recommended for people living with arthritis, such as glucosamine or chondroitin sulfate.

While many people do report symptom improvements from changing what they eat, there is no scientific evidence that any particular diet will necessarily improve RA symptoms.

Lifestyle changes are certainly worth exploring if RA patients are interested, they are not a miracle cure for RA.

If you know someone living with RA, try to keep these six things in mind next time you talk to them. While we are aware advice and recommendations are well-meaning, most people living with RA would prefer support and effort towards understanding RA.