9 Serious RA Symptoms You Shouldn’t Ignore

by LANA BARHUM

Don't Ignore These Serious RA Symptoms

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) causes many symptoms. The most common are stiff and painful joints and fatigue.

But RA can cause inflammation anywhere in the body, and other symptoms you may not know are related to RA. Some of these are serious enough to put your organs and your life at risk. Specifically, there are nine serious RA symptoms you shouldn’t ignore.

A Persistent Cough

The same inflammation affecting your joints also affects other parts of your body, including your lungs. RA lung complications affect up to 50% of people with RA, this according to one 2015 report in the journal, *Rheumatic Diseases Clinics of North America*.

RA lung involvement can cause chest tightness and coughing. Any cough lasting more than one week should be brought to the attention of your doctor, especially if you have a fever and feel sick.

A persistent cough could be a sign of interstitial lung disease, an RA complication where inflammation has caused scarring. You may also experience shortness of breath or other breathing difficulties with lung scarring.

Chest Pain

RA increases your risk for heart disease. Research reported in the journal, *Nature Reviews Rheumatology*, finds 50% of premature deaths in the people with RA are related to heart disease.

Several heart conditions are more common in people with RA, including heart attack, stroke, congestive heart failure, and atherosclerosis.

Pericarditis is common in people with RA, causing the thin layers of tissue around the heart to become inflamed. This condition may cause severe chest pain, which is easily mistaken for a heart attack.

Most of the time pericarditis resolves on its own. Even though chest pain may not be a heart attack, it is still wise to call for emergency help or go an emergency room right away if you experience it.

Numbness and Balance Issues

The more severe your RA is, the more likely it will affect your spine, causing numbness and balance problems. The good news is this complication is rare due to the current medications available to treat RA, but it is still wise to report numbness and balance problems to your doctor.

People with RA are also at an increased risk for type 2 diabetes, which can cause diabetic nerve damage and cause numbness and tingling symptoms. If you also have diabetes, work with your doctor to make sure both diseases are managed.

Skin Rashes

In people with RA, painful rashes or dark spots on your fingers or toes might be an early warning sign of vasculitis. This condition causes inflammation of the blood vessels, causing them to become weak and narrow, thus reducing blood flow to your hands and feet.

Vasculitis can be a painful, and in severe, but rare cases, loss of a finger or toe is possible. The condition can be treated with steroids, and medications to reduce inflammation and restore blood flow.

Dryness

RA makes it more likely for you to develop another autoimmune disease, Sjogren's syndrome. Sjogren's causes mouth, nose, eye, vagina and skin dryness.

Research shows up to 31% of people with RA have Sjogren's, and up to 50% of RA patients experience eye and mouth dryness that isn't Sjogren's.

Eye dryness in RA can cause inflammation to the white part of the eye. Symptoms include redness, pain, and blurry vision. These symptoms should not be ignored and brought to your doctor's attention.

Fever

The medications you take to treat RA slow down your immune system, which makes it harder for your immune system to fight illnesses. RA also makes it twice as likely to get an infection and fever could be a sign of infection.

Fever is also a sign of an RA flare, resulting when RA inflammation is out of control. You should tell your doctor if you experience fevers, even low-grade ones (around 99 to 100 degrees Fahrenheit).

Gastrointestinal Problems

RA increases your risk for stomach ulcers and bleeding and conditions like diverticulitis and colitis. Gastrointestinal problems are related to inflammation and are also a side effect of medications used manage RA pain, including nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) and corticosteroids.

People with RA are more likely to experience diarrhea or constipation often. This is an indication that gut bacteria – good and bad – is unbalanced.

You should not let stomach issues escalate, because your risk of developing a serious infection or other problem is high. Pay attention to your body and figure out what is normal for you and what you need to talk to your doctor about.

Mood Changes

Up to 42% of people with RA are depressed, this according to researchers out of the University of California. And people with RA who are depressed have worse health outcomes, poor medication adherence, and higher incidences of pain, disability, and death.

Talk to your doctor about changes in your mood or symptoms of anxiety you may experience. He or she can suggest therapy and/or prescribe medication to treat your symptoms.

Broken Bones

Studies have found an increased risk of bone loss and fracture in people with RA. RA and the medications used to treat it put you at a higher risk for osteoporosis.

Osteoporosis makes your bones weak and brittle with time, and people with this condition are more likely to break a bone if they have a fall or other injury. Women with RA have the highest risk for osteoporosis, which is two to three times more than for men with RA, this according to the National Institutes of Health's Osteoporosis and Related Bone Diseases Resource Center.

If you are not moving your joints often because of fatigue and joint pain, they will become weak. And fractures are more likely if bones are weak and thin.

The Bottom Line

You should work with your doctor to manage RA and your overall health. You should bring any serious symptoms to your doctor's attention right away.

The better your RA is managed, the less likely you are to have complications. And even if complications do occur, identifying them early on can halt long-term effects of RA.