Everything You Need to Know About Rheumatoid Arthritis

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What Is Rheumatoid Arthritis?

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is an autoimmune disease where your body mistakenly has an inflammatory response. Typically, your body's immune system works to identify and fight off infection by attacking harmful bacteria or viruses.

When the body responds this way to your joints, it results in pain, stiffness, and loss of motion. Rheumatoid arthritis is just one of many types of chronic pain diseases in the autoimmune family. Numerous kinds of arthritis differ based on how it affects the body and where the majority of inflammation is occurring.

For example, osteoarthritis is a degenerative joint disease that only attacks cartilage, where rheumatoid arthritis can affect body systems and cause organ damage. Rheumatoid arthritis needs to be diagnosed by a physician with most often a rheumatologist brought on to the treatment team as well.

It's important to get a definite diagnosis because if RA goes unchecked, it can damage organs and cause problems with your circulatory or respiratory systems. When treated early and aggressively, the damage can be slowed and symptoms alleviated with a variety of treatment options.

Warning Signs of Rheumatoid Arthritis

If you start to notice any of these symptoms, be sure to share your concerns with your doctor:

- **Fatigue:** Fatigue can be difficult to attribute to any one condition, but when you're so tired you are adjusting your daily routine, it can be a symptom of RA. You may notice that you're still tired after a good night's sleep, or you're changing your plans because of how tired you feel.
- **Low-grade fever:** A low-grade fever along with feeling vaguely sick can be a sign of your body fighting a kind of infection. In the case of rheumatoid arthritis, it is your body attacking the linings around your joints. If your arthritis, it is your body attacking the linings around your joints. If you have a low-grade fever without any other flu symptoms, it can be a sign of an autoimmune disease.
- **Joint problems:** When the joints are inflamed, they may become warm, swollen or stiff. You may find yourself making adjustments throughout the day to accommodate the achy feelings in your joints. The most common places to feel joint pain are in the hands, wrists, hips, knees or ankles.
- **Weight loss:** Losing weight without making an effort to can be a sign of a health problem. You may have inflammation in your stomach, making absorption of nutrients more of a challenge. Seeing your doctors for regular blood work will help identify any deficiencies, and a supplement can help replace what is needed.

How Is RA Diagnosed?

Identifying an autoimmune disease is not always a fast, easy process. Symptoms can be challenging to pinpoint, and chronic pain is notoriously inconsistent.

You will most likely start the diagnostic process with your primary doctor, and if they suspect an autoimmune disease, they will refer to you to a rheumatologist. A rheumatologist is a physician specializing in arthritis, fibromyalgia, gout, Lupus and all other types of autoimmune conditions.

This doctor will confirm the diagnosis of rheumatoid arthritis through gathering your medical history, your family's medical background, analysis of your symptoms, and bloodwork. Imaging tests like X-rays and MRIs will be used to track the progression of joint damage.

Blood tests will determine if rheumatoid arthritis is the appropriate diagnosis because there are indicators that show inflammation. If there are elevated levels of two tests, the erythrocyte sedimentation rate (SED rate) and the C-reactive protein (CRP), then a diagnosis of RA is confirmed.

Making the Most of Your Doctor's Visit

When you start working with more than one doctor, information can get mixed up pretty easily. It will become important for you to keep careful records of your symptoms, medications, reactions, and allergies to help keep everyone on the same page.

Some physicians are connected online with various programs that keep track of your test results and doctor's visits. If you have the opportunity to take advantage of such a program, it's worth it.

It is also wise to have either a typed or handwritten account of information with one copy for your medical records and one for your own records at home. Having a written account at the start of your visit makes the most of your time and may keep you from forgetting to mention a worsening symptom or a new supplement you may have started trying.

The more informed you are of your condition, the easier it will be to determine a course of action.

Next page: Learn more about what rheumatoid arthritis is, including risk factors of RA and RA treatment options – prescription and natural.

Risk Factors for Rheumatoid Arthritis

Rheumatoid arthritis is a disease that has no known cause. Genetics play a significant role, which is why your doctors need to know as much about your family's medical history as your own.

Other factors put people at a higher risk beyond the genetic component:

- **Age:** People between the ages of 40 and 60 are most likely to develop RA, although there are cases of younger or older patients.
- **Gender:** Women are twice as likely as men to suffer from rheumatoid arthritis.
- **Environmental factors:** Some studies link asbestos and air pollutants to the risk of RA. Certain triggers can start the disease although there is more research to be completed.
- **Obesity:** Women who were considered obese showed a greater tendency to be diagnosed with RA. Extra weight can trigger an inflammatory response and lead to a rheumatoid arthritis flare.

How Is Rheumatoid Arthritis Treated?

When rheumatoid arthritis is first diagnosed, the most common form of treatment is with medications known as DMARDs (disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs). These medications are designed to slow the progression of damage from RA as much as possible to prevent permanent damage.

The goal of early aggressive treatment is to push rheumatoid arthritis into remission, where there is a reduction in active symptoms.

When symptoms do start to become aggravated, it is referred to as a flare. While you may not be able to eliminate every symptom, the medications that are started early can significantly prevent more problems down the road.

Once the inflammation is under better control, you will find a variety of ways to help manage your symptoms on a day to day basis. Before trying anything new, be sure to run your idea past your doctor so they can be made aware of any potential side effects or drug interactions.

Prescription and Over-the-Counter Treatment

- **Steroid treatment:** Doctors prescribe steroids like prednisone in short phases due to the long-term side effects. Steroids are highly successful in reducing inflammation and treating acute symptoms. They're not recommended for continuous, daily use.
- **NSAIDs:** NSAIDs are a group of medications that treat inflammation. Aleve, Advil, and Motrin are over the counter strength NSAIDs, and others are available for prescription strength. These can be very helpful in controlling inflammation from a flare. Long-term side effects can include stomach irritation and high blood pressure, so you need to be monitored while taking these medications.

Surgery for Rheumatoid Arthritis

There may come a time when your doctor recommends surgery to help with your rheumatoid arthritis treatment. Be sure to take the time to understand your options and if possible, seek a second opinion to ensure you have all the information you need to decide.

There are several different types of surgical procedures aimed at providing relief from RA symptoms:

- **Synovectomy:** The lining of your joints is called the synovium. This procedure removes the lining entirely and with it, the inflammation.
- **Tendon repair:** Tendons can become loose and damaged because of RA inflammation, and in some cases rupture. The surgeon can repair any damage to the tendon which will, in turn, strengthen the joint.
- **Joint fusion:** If a joint cannot be replaced, fusing the joints together can improve stability and reduce pain symptoms.
- **Joint replacement:** A joint can be completely replaced by one made of plastic and metal with the damaged material removed.

Natural Remedies for Rheumatoid Arthritis

Once you have exhausted the treatment options from a pharmaceutical standpoint, you may find that you're in need of more daily remedies to help treat rheumatoid arthritis symptoms. There also may be times you need to stop your prescription regimen for a while and having other treatment options can help in the meantime.

As always, consult with your physician, rheumatologist or physical therapist when starting a new therapy or natural treatment. They may be able to give you valuable insight and instructions to make your treatment plan the most effective it can be.

Next page: Discover what the natural remedies for RA are and information on RA and diet.

Natural Remedies for Rheumatoid Arthritis

Exercise

When fatigue and joint pain are working together, pushing through to exercise can be a daily struggle. It may feel as though you are doing the opposite of what you want to be doing: resting.

Knowing when to rest and when to exercise gently may never be 100 percent foolproof. Do try to exercise as

often as you can, as flexible joints are happy joints.

Swimming, walking, yoga, and tai chi are low impact activities that can keep you moving better throughout the day and improve your mood. Avoid high impact activities that can aggravate the joints.

Adaptive Help

Depending on where you suffer from rheumatoid arthritis symptoms, there are numerous tools on the market to improve your daily routine. From kitchen utensils to modifications on your car, you can look into how these devices can improve your day. Be sure to speak with a physical therapist for even more specific ideas for your particular needs.

Stress Management

Managing a chronic pain condition like rheumatoid arthritis is exhausting and time-consuming. It can feel very overwhelming on top of the day to day responsibilities we all have. Carving out time for self-care, relaxation or a conversation with a therapist or trusted friend can help keep the stress manageable.

Acupuncture

Many people have found the practice of acupuncture to be relaxing, aid in pain relief and improve mobility. Very thin needles are poked just under the skin to release endorphins. Be sure to ask for recommendations and check the qualifications of your therapist.

Sleep

Getting enough sleep can be a challenge if rheumatoid arthritis pain is keeping you up at night, or if you have sleep apnea. Eight hours of sleep (give or take) will help your body get the rest it needs to battle RA. Talk to your doctor if you are having bouts of insomnia or if you suspect you have sleep apnea.

Good sleep health includes staying away from caffeine in the late afternoon, going screen free for at least an hour before trying to sleep and keeping the bedroom dark and cool. If you do suffer from sleep apnea, a mask can be worn at night to improve your breathing.

Rheumatoid Arthritis and Nutrition

Your stomach can really have a rough time with rheumatoid arthritis.

Not only can the disease itself cause inflammation, but medications can give your stomach trouble, especially NSAIDs. If the lining of the stomach becomes inflamed, you can have a hard time absorbing needed vitamins. A regular blood test will be able to pinpoint any deficiencies.

Eating a diet of whole grains, vegetables, and fruits are considered an anti-inflammatory diet. Foods typically associated with inflammation include processed food, sugar, fried food, dairy, meats, and foods high in fat. If you are having trouble switching to a different diet, you may want to consider working with a nutritionist to help you develop a rheumatoid arthritis diet or until you feel comfortable on your own.

Certain foods have stood out when talking about an anti-inflammatory diet. Turmeric and curcumin are two spices with widely accepted properties to help curb inflammation, as well as cherries, foods rich in omega-3 fatty acids like fatty fish, and garlic.

Alcohol, red meat and foods containing gluten can make your stomach work harder than it needs to and lead to inflammation, so it is best to avoid these foods.

Next page: Tips for living with rheumatoid arthritis, including building a support team, ways to stay optimistic, and

self-care practices.

Build a Support Team

Managing a chronic disease like rheumatoid arthritis can impact your relationships, social life, and even your mood. You are going to want to be around people that understand your condition without adding unnecessary stress.

There are online support communities where you can share your experience, stay up-to-date on breakthroughs and treatments, and learn of new ways to manage RA as best you can.

Communication is going to be more important than ever before. You will need to be able to talk to your family, friends, and people you work with so they can gain an understanding of how they can help. If you have never been assertive about your needs before, living with RA will give you the chance to hone those skills.

I found this to be particularly challenging, but have learned to set boundaries for myself when I needed a break or had to adjust an activity. It gets easier with more practice.

Symptoms are known to come on quickly, and being able to change or modify plans will save you a lot of stress. You may be surprised at how creative people can be if you ask for help.

Another way to seek support is to join a spiritual community or a local support group for people managing chronic illness. Finding a way to help someone else who is on this journey can provide a much-needed distraction from the challenges it brings.

The most important thing you can do for yourself is to try to be patient with the process, and kind to yourself when you're having a bad day.

Keeping the Faith

Researchers are working tirelessly to improve the quality of life for people living with all kind of arthritis. It may be difficult to stay optimistic if you're in the midst of a flare, but try to remember that there is a great big arthritis family out there working diligently to help find a cure.

You may find it helpful to get involved with fundraising within your local community. There may be times when anxiety or depression set in from the stress of managing chronic pain. Be sure to ask for help if you need it.

Some therapists can help you make changes to help your symptoms and provide support. Life is stressful as it is, and having fatigue and pain as your closest friends can make it feel challenging. Everyone could use a helping hand through this.

Rheumatoid arthritis cannot be cured, but with the help of your doctors and a variety of treatment options, it can be managed successfully. Being as actively involved with your treatment plan can keep the disease in remission and ease flares.

People with severe RA have been known to have a reduction in life expectancy of about ten years because of the damage caused to body systems or organs, which is why early aggressive treatment is so often the preferred plan of action.

Cultivate Joy

Living with a chronic pain condition can wear on you physically and emotionally. You will need to build in time within your self-care program to do something that brings you joy. Watching your favorite sports team play, listening to a new book online or learning how to cook, can keep your spirits up through this journey.

Doctors’ appointments, treatments, food preparation and needing time to exercise may leave you feeling stretched thin. Set aside time weekly to plan as strategically as possible. You may find it helpful to delegate certain tasks to conserve your energy or control your pain level.

The time you take to care for yourself is never wasted. Your health is the basis from which you do everything else, so please be kind to yourself and may you be in remission for a very long time.