How Rheumatoid Arthritis Affects the Knees

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The Impact of Rheumatoid Arthritis Can Have on the Knee Joint

I initially started experiencing the effects of rheumatoid arthritis in my own knee joint five years ago at the age of 26, right after a flare-up that left me bed-ridden for a week.

When I started to feel pain and limited range of motion during my everyday chores, I came to the realization of just how important our knees are.

Having no extensive issues in my knee joint prior to this, it was a whole new territory for me even though I had other joints that were problematic for years.

Our musculoskeletal system is complex and each joint has its own way of functioning alongside their respective muscles, tendons, ligaments, nerve endings and other soft tissues.

So, is the impact always bad on the knee joint? Not always but it can be if rheumatoid arthritis is moderate to severe enough and left untreated or undertreated. As in my case, it's what led me down the path of a total knee replacement two years ago.

How it can get to the point of irreversible damage does not happen overnight though.

Rheumatoid arthritis is a chronic inflammatory disease were the immune system targets the synovium – the thin membrane that surrounds the joints and releases inflammatory chemicals into the body by mistake, leading to signs of pain, swelling, inflammation in the soft tissues, loss of function and disability.

While there are many forms of arthritis that can affect the knees, rheumatoid arthritis can cause bone erosion, swollen and inflamed synovial tissue, reduced joint space and cartilage that is worn away, leading to irreversible damage in some cases.

Understanding the signs and symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis in the knee can help you and your doctor get an early rheumatoid arthritis knee diagnosis and treat it aggressively to limit any complications.

Rheumatoid Arthritis Knee Symptoms to Be Aware Of

I knew I had a serious problem with my knee because my symptoms became moderate to severe. If you are active like me, you would tell almost immediately that something feels off.

Some telltale rheumatoid arthritis knee signs to look out for:

- **Increase in pain that is gradual.** Worsening pain that goes from mild, then moderate to severe where you cannot function is a sign that there is damage.

- **Pain while at rest.** If pain while resting is constant for weeks and months, it is a sign that rheumatoid arthritis has impacted the knee.
- **Prolonged swelling that returns even after icing and taking over-the-counter medications or anti-inflammatory agents.** When typical methods no longer work to control your pain and inflammation, it is a sign to move on to stronger methods of relief.
- **Locking, buckling or instability.** Weakness in muscles around the joint can lead to these symptoms because muscles play a big role in keeping the surrounding structures strong. These symptoms can come and go, with times of not being able to straighten or bend the knee.
- **Cracking and popping.** Everyone experiences cracking and popping but with rheumatoid arthritis, a grinding sensation is felt, in part to losing some of the smooth cartilage creating the rough surfaces and any bone spurs to rub together.
- **Poor range of motion.** This can occur before the physical deformities are seen. If you notice you cannot get up from a chair, climb up and down stairs or get out of your car like you use to, then you have loss of motion that is often treated by a physical therapist before choosing other invasive options such as, knee surgery.
- **A decrease in joint space.** X-rays and ultrasound tests can confirm this.
- **Deformities.** Physical changes that can be seen with the naked eye are the most severe and can require surgery to correct it.

This is when you need to openly communicate with your doctor to get prompt treatments and tests to rule out where the problem is within the joint. By doing this you can gauge what is needed to be done next.

Rheumatoid Arthritis Knee Treatment Options

There are many conventional and alternative methods available. I tried both methods alone and together until I was left with the only option of needing surgery.

Some conventional treatments to consider:

- Injections of corticosteroids.
- Physical and occupational therapy.
- Surgery.

Alternative options:

- Weight Loss.
- Exercise.
- Swimming and warm water pool.
- Massage.
- Acupuncture.
- Stretching.
- Rest, ice and elevate your feet to heart level.
- Stem cell therapy.
- Supplements such as; curcumin turmeric, fish oil, glucosamine, chondroitin and vitamin D.

The Takeaway

It’s important to know that these treatments options are individual and considered on a case by case basis. What works for one person, may or may not work for you. Depending on the severity of your knee joint, many alternative therapies may only provide temporary relief. It is at that point that discretion needs to be used and a decision with your doctor for further action taken into account for the long-haul.