How to Fight the Flu When You Have Rheumatoid Arthritis

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How To Cope With the Flu and Rheumatoid Arthritis

Dealing with a virus or bacteria going around is one thing when you are healthy. If you are living with rheumatoid arthritis (RA), however, that is another story.

The medications used to treat rheumatoid arthritis can make you more susceptible to infection. Drugs such as biologics, disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs (DMARDs), and corticosteroids all impact the body in different ways.

The risk is doubled if you are taking more than one medication.

Does the Flu Make RA Symptoms Worse?

With rheumatoid arthritis, your body is already "fighting a foreign invader". Many patients say the symptoms of RA can mimic having “flu-like” symptoms.

When your body is bombarded again, RA symptoms can flare and cause more issues.

According to research published in August 2012 in the journal *BMC Musculoskeletal Disorders*, “People with RA have a 2.75-fold increased risk of having complications (such as pneumonia, heart attacks, and strokes) related to seasonal influenza regardless of whether or not they take DMARDs or biologics”.

Conventional vs. Alternative Preventative Flu Measures

- **Wash your hands and don’t touch your face.** A general rule of them and easy to do.
- **Drink plenty of water.** Keeping your body hydrated and not dehydrated, is the motto. Flushing out toxins and keeping your mucous membranes moist will help during dry cold winter months.
- **Take supplements.** This is a topic often debated. No matter what you believe, taking a good multivitamin and checking your vitamin D levels is important. Especially if you live in the Northern Hemisphere during the winter, as low levels are known to cause pain, inflammation and lowered immunity.
- **Proper nutrition.** Eating a balanced meal with lots of fruits and vegetables, while avoiding processed foods and sugar will keep you strong.
- **Stop smoking.** If you have rheumatoid arthritis, this is a must. Studies have shown an increased risk of developing RA if you smoke. Plus, when you have the flu, cough and a fever, this will further aggravate the condition and lead to complications like bronchitis or pneumonia.
- **Get a diffuser, air purifier, humidifier or vaporizer for your room and/or home.** Dry air can increase your chances of getting sick. Opening up your windows and letting sunlight in, is also a good alternative.
- **Salt rinse.** A pH balanced can help clean out your nasal passages allowing for easier breathing and removal of irritants in a fast manner.
- **Limit stressors.** Anything that is causing you unnecessary anxiety or worry will fuel the fire.

- **Get a good amount of sleep.** Ever notice that when you don't sleep well, you feel run down? That's a sign your body is telling you to slow down.
- **Get moving.** Exercise gives your immune system a boost.
- **Avoid people who are sick.** Stay away from those you know who are sick or have been sick, if you can help it.
- **Invest in a face mask.** Visit your local store to get a disposable face mask, rubber gloves, hand sanitizers, and wipes.

Treating the Flu and Rheumatoid Arthritis

The flu shot and pneumonia vaccine are the first lines of defense to "pre-treat" an RA patient.

The flu shot will not make you sick; the belief that the flu shot can cause sickness is a major complaint and reason why people decide to go against vaccinating, but it is a myth.

It's understandable that one doesn't want to feel sick after getting an injection, but the reality is that vaccines can help prevent you from getting sick, not the other way around. And when someone has an autoimmune disease and may be immunocompromised, prevention through vaccination is extremely important.

Dr. Tambetta Ojong says that the vaccine doesn't work right away instead, "it takes about two weeks after vaccination for antibodies to develop in the body and provide protection against influenza. This is why you may develop the flu around the time you get a vaccine because you were exposed before getting the vaccine and were not protected at the time you got infected".

Some medications require that you stop them if you come down with an infection, in order to give your body a chance to heal.

How to Manage the Flu and Rheumatoid Arthritis Together

One thing to take into account is if you keep getting sick and not better...

- Talk to your doctor to see if you can change medications or lower the dosage to give your body a chance to recover, if applicable.
- Consider investigating your gut health as well, which studies have found links to certain bacterial markers and rheumatoid arthritis. If your gut is healthy, you'll be happy.
- Also, an anti-viral could work but will need to be approved by your rheumatologist. Many RA medications have interactions and can increase liver enzyme counts if not careful.
- WebMD states that the CDC recommends Xofluza, Tamiflu, Raptiva and Relenza. The drugs work best when you get them within 48 hours of your first symptoms.
- Staying home from work and school, getting plenty of rest and fluids, and self-care time is a must.
- Taking over-the-counter pain medications such as aspirin or ibuprofen for a fever can help.

The Takeaway

Keep in close communication with your doctor and speak up if you feel you're not getting better.

Regarding at-home remedies, there is some, but conflicting evidence regarding the effectiveness of vitamins and herbs such as Echinacea in preventing and reducing the symptoms of the flu. That is not to say that these options can't be used to support your overall well-being.

Understanding what you can do to prevent, treat and cope with the flu is the most useful tool of all so that you can reduce your chances of complications.