What Is Considered a Normal and a High Rheumatoid Factor?

by EFFIE KOLIOPOULOS

Understanding Rheumatoid Factor Range

Rheumatoid arthritis is known as an autoimmune disease that attacks the healthy tissues around the joint capsule called the synovium. At present, there is no explanation for why some people develop rheumatoid arthritis. However, there are standard blood tests that can be done to determine if the symptoms someone is having are caused by RA. Some of these tests include rheumatoid factor range (RF), erythrocyte sedimentation (ESR or sed rate) and C-reactive protein (CRP). All of these can detect inflammation and proteins in the blood called antibodies.

Researchers have found that those individuals who are most susceptible have certain genes that may be turned on by an environmental trigger, such as a virus or bacteria, family history, stress, or some other internal and external factors.

The most important thing to remember is to get a prompt and accurate diagnosis. Seeking out a rheumatologist who specializes in treating patients with a wide range of rheumatic diseases is the first step. Many times, rheumatoid arthritis can have similar symptoms to other forms of arthritis and health conditions.

What Is Rheumatoid Factor?

Rheumatoid factor, also abbreviated as RF, is one of the antibodies that doctors look at. This blood protein is found in about 80% of people who are diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis. However, it is also seen in those who do not have any signs of the disease.

People who are not diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis typically do not produce any RF in their blood, but there is a small percentage of healthy individuals who do. Researchers and doctors have yet to find out why this happens.

Rheumatoid factor is one of the proteins that fuels the RA response, as it is made by the immune system to target healthy tissues in the body that are seen as invaders. This phenomenon is called cellular mimicry. This is when the body cannot differentiate what is an invader, such as a virus or bacteria, and mistakenly thinks that healthy tissues are the invader.

Having RF in your blood is a good indicator that you have rheumatoid arthritis, but doctors can also use this test to rule out different autoimmune diseases in general. Some of the other conditions that can cause rheumatoid factors to be high are chronic infection, cirrhosis, inflammatory lung disease, lupus, mixed connective tissue disease, or cancer.

Other chronic health conditions elevate RF levels too such as HIV or AIDS, influenza, hepatitis, viral and parasitic infections, chronic lung and liver diseases, and leukemia. The only difference is that doctors do not use RF antibody proteins alone to diagnose these other conditions, while rheumatologists do use this as a main testing

tool.

Taking a Look at Lab Test Results

The lab test for rheumatoid factor is relatively painless and can be done during routine bloodwork. Rheumatologists specialize in reading test results such as rheumatoid factor.

Depending on the lab that administered the tests and the doctor reading them, what is considered normal or out of range can vary from provider to provider by only a small amount. A normal rheumatoid factor range is considered a negative test result and for rheumatoid factor, this is less than 20 u/ml. Any levels above 20 u/ml are considered to be abnormally high, elevated or positive.

When someone shows to have a positive rheumatoid factor, then it is easier for doctors to diagnose a patient with rheumatoid arthritis, especially if other characteristics of the disease are present. This test in combination with a patient's family and personal medical history can give clarity to the situation. However, a positive test is not enough on its own to diagnose RA, as there could be other reasons for a high rheumatoid factor.

If rheumatoid arthritis is confirmed and the RF is high, this can also indicate a more aggressive form of the disease. A high rheumatoid factor leads to a person's tendency towards the formation of nodules under the skin and rheumatoid lung disease.

The Connection to Rheumatoid Arthritis

When a person has a rheumatoid factor, they most often have the disease. In rare cases, some people may have small traces of RF in their blood, even when they do not have rheumatoid arthritis. This is why doctors look at the symptoms, along with x-rays of the joints to see if any structural changes are occurring.

If a patient comes in with signs of autoimmune arthritis, the RF test will be the first one they do. Common signs and symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis are joint stiffness, joint pain in the early morning and late evening, nodules under the skin, and red and warm inflamed joints.

Rheumatoid factors when present can not only cause healthy joints to be attacked but also other glands or normal cells in the body. This antibody is present in those with juvenile arthritis, infections and cancer too.

The only effect the rheumatoid factor has on the diagnosis process is getting proper treatment and care. Researchers have found that early and aggressive treatment is needed to stop the inflammation that can cause irreversible joint destruction.

The Key Takeaway of Rheumatoid Factor Range Testing

Rheumatoid arthritis can be a complex disease to diagnose and treat. Rheumatoid factor is one of the ways medical professionals can detect the disease in patients, along with their medical history. The main goals a rheumatologist has for their patients are to relieve symptoms, stop or lower inflammation in the body, and prevent damage to other tissues in the body and organs such as the eyes, heart and lungs.

Testing for rheumatoid factor allows a doctor to know what the disease is exactly, so they can give the proper medication if it does end up being rheumatoid arthritis. Medication, supplements, and various lifestyle changes can all aid in improving function, reduce long-term complications, increase chances of remission, and overall well-being.