The Stress-Arthritis Connection

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Managing Rheumatoid Arthritis and Stress

Do you suffer from rheumatoid arthritis and notice flare ups often coincide with stressful situations? You are not alone. Stress is one of the major triggers of an RA attack. Let's look at the relationship between stress and RA.

It is a vicious cycle: RA causes stress and stress further aggravates the pain and other symptoms of RA. Researchers suggest that the chemicals released in the body during a stressful time may play a role, since these brain chemicals trigger the production of other substances that promote inflammation. A review of scientific literature published in 2010 in *Arthritis Research and Therapy* evaluated the link between RA and stress and concluded that there is enough evidence to support that stress can be a flare trigger for RA suffers.

To reduce the number of flares you experience, do your best to eliminate stress. Consider the following tips to combat rheumatoid arthritis and stress:

Work Out Regularly

Your pain may be intense at times and you may think that resting is the best way to control the symptoms. While you should get enough rest during flare ups, try to stay as active as you can. Exercise improves mood, reduces stress, and keeps your joints flexible. During exercise feel good chemicals (which also have pain killing qualities) such as serotonin, dopamine, and endorphins are released. Try aerobic exercises, yoga, strength training and weight lifting. If you can, work with a physical therapist who can design a special program just for you.

Relaxation Techniques

Try some relaxation techniques such as mindful meditation, deep breathing and guided imagery – these techniques have be shown to decrease your stress levels, and pain as well. During guided imagery, you focus your attention and form mental images (i.e. places, situations) that make you feel relaxed. For optimal benefits, you have to use all your senses – you have to see, smell and feel with your whole body and mind that relaxing place or situation.

Sleep Well

Your body's cells regenerate and repair during sleep. The mind also deals with the emotions experienced during the day, and relaxes. Try to keep a regular sleep schedule by controlling pain as well as you can and avoiding use of your computer, TV and phone at least one hour before bedtime.

Other Lifestyle Changes

Eat a healthy diet based on fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, beans, lean meats, with minimally

processed foods. Have a light dinner at least 3-4 hours before bedtime. Avoid smoking, excessive caffeine and drink plenty of water and herbal teas.

See a Healthcare Professional

Consider meeting with a psychologist, social worker or counselor. He/she will help you cope better with your day-to-day stress and teach you effective anti-stress strategies. You may also want to join an online forum to chat with other people with RA who experience stress and learn from each other how to handle it better.

Taking a proactive role in your health will help you build confidence and a sense of control over your condition, rather than allowing pain to control your life.