# Breathe Easier Despite Rheumatoid Arthritis

by AMY MANLEY

## Rheumatoid Arthritis and Breathing Difficulties

While most people know about the impact rheumatoid arthritis has on the joints and surrounding tissue, many people do not know that rheumatoid arthritis and breathing difficulties can be connected. This lack of knowledge can lead someone who has RA and is experiencing breathing difficulties to look into other causes. By learning more about rheumatoid arthritis and its effect on breathing, you can better understand the condition and seek the proper treatment.

### RA Impacts More Than Joints

According to Elinor Mody, MD, from the Brigham and Women's Hospital Women's Orthopedic and Joint Disease Center, the condition should actually be called rheumatoid disease because it has an impact on several areas of the body outside of the joints, including the heart and lungs. The organs are directly impacted, but researchers have yet to find the link. When the lungs are affected by rheumatoid arthritis, it can be very serious.

### Lung Disease

There's a name for rheumatoid arthritis' effect on the lungs – rheumatoid arthritis-associated interstitial lung disease, also known as RA-ILD. The severity of this condition differs from patient to patient. Some patients experience minor breathing difficulties as a side-effect of their rheumatoid arthritis, while others experience severe symptoms that can be life threatening.

The issue with this form of lung disease is that it's difficult to detect. While rheumatoid arthritis can be found through scans, this lung condition can only be detected when it has progressed and the tissue within the lungs becomes damaged. When the tissue appears scarred and inflamed, RA-ILD can be detected, but by this time it can already be in its last stage.

### Symptoms

The main symptom of this lung disease is a dry cough, and difficulty breathing. However, symptoms are not always present, which is one of the main reasons why it's a difficult condition to detect until it progresses.

There are some factors that increase your risk of developing RA-ILD. For one, men are known to be at a higher risk than women, although the exact reason is unknown. Like many lung problems, RA-ILD does occur in non-smokers, but is more common in smokers.

### Treatment

There's ongoing research regarding treatment for RA with lung disease. Symptoms can be managed with

medications like Rituxan (which is currently undergoing trial), but there’s no one effective treatment option to reverse or cure it. Experts have stated that until further research occurs, it remains one of the most difficult conditions to treat.

Oxygen is also used as a method of treatment, as ongoing oxygen treatments can increase oxygen levels in the body, decreasing breathlessness that’s seen in RA-ILD.

**Prevention - Quit Smoking**

While it’s impossible to do anything to guarantee you won’t develop RA-ILD altogether, you can decrease your chances of developing it. Quitting smoking is the best step, as cigarette smoke increases your chances of development in several ways. Cigarette smoke not only aggravates the lung, but the chemicals present in the smoke may be linked directly to its development.