How RA and RA Treatment Can Damage Kidneys

by ANGELA FINLAY

Rheumatoid Arthritis and Kidney Disease

A 20-year American study on rheumatoid arthritis and kidney disease has pointed to an undeniable link between the two conditions. After tracking the participants for two decades, results show that the RA patients had a 25% risk of developing kidney disease, which is noticeably higher than the general population. However, results suggest that a patient's lifestyle, state of general health, and specific RA experience all come into play to determine the ultimate risk to their kidneys, which calls for a closer look into your RA history and your current treatment plan.

Link between Rheumatoid Arthritis and Kidney Disease

Not all RA patients are destined for kidney problems. The research shows that some clear (and potentially avoidable) risk factors will increase your chance of developing renal disease, such as:

- Severe inflammation within the first year of RA diagnosis
- Use of corticosteroids, such as prednisone and cortisone
- High blood pressure (hypertension)
- Obesity
- High blood cholesterol levels

Both the chronic inflammation of RA and the drugs used to treat it have been known to cause a variety of kidney disorders. The recent findings serve as a reminder of the far-reaching effects of RA in the body, but also point out that a careful and balanced approach to treatment can offer better protection against other serious health threats.

Avoid, Spot and Treat Kidney Problems

Currently, there are no clear guidelines to treat kidney disease and RA simultaneously, so protecting against kidney problems is certainly worth the effort. There are a few simple but crucial steps you can take to reduce your chances of complications without giving up on your RA management:

- **Keep a healthy diet.** While you probably won't have to limit your protein and phosphorous intake if you don't already have kidney disease, you can reduce your chances of contracting renal problems by sticking with a balanced diet. Concentrate on fresh food and dishes that are low in salt in order to keep your blood pressure in a healthy range. Also, have your cholesterol tested periodically to make sure your levels are adequate – high cholesterol may not bring any signs or symptoms, but can wreak havoc on your overall health.
- **Adjust medications.** Certain medications are known to stress the kidneys if taken in large amounts, so pay close attention to the drugs you take for pain relief and for your RA progression. Corticosteroids were found to increase the risk of kidney disease in recent studies, but non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) can also cause problems if taken regularly over a long period of time. Talk to your doctor about

changing to medications that are gentler on your kidneys.

- **Get checked.** Tests to determine kidney problems are typically fairly easy and non-invasive, so there's no need to avoid the annual screen that experts advise. A blood creatinine test can measure glomerular filtration rate (GFR) to show how well your kidneys are eliminating waste, and a urinalysis can check for too much protein, red blood cells and white blood cells (which may point to kidney disease).

Kidney disease doesn't necessary cause discomfort until it becomes a chronic and serious matter. Some of the most common first signs to watch for are changes in urine (less, more, dark in color, or containing blood), swelling (your kidneys are unable to eliminate extra fluid), and fatigue (could signal anemia). Pain around the kidneys is less common than you might imagine, so don't wait for physical agony to consult with your doctor.