Understand the Link Between RA and Lung Problems

by BRENDA VANTA

RA and Lung Disease

Beyond causing damage to the joints, RA can affect the entire body, including your lungs. Although not easy to detect, a variety of lung diseases can occur. Read on to learn pulmonary rehabilitation should be used in these cases.

Lung Diseases Associated with RA

- **Interstitial Lug disease (ILD) –** This is the most commonly lung condition diagnosed in RA sufferers. It develops because the lung tissues become inflamed and later affected by scars. Sometimes there are no symptoms, while other times a person may experience breathless and a dry cough. If you are a man, it is more likely to develop ILD, compared with women. You can reduce the chances of developing ILD by not smoking, as this seems to be a risk factor. The prescription drug Rituximab is currently under research for ILD.
- **Pulmonary fibrosis –** This is characterized by permanent scarring of the lungs, and can the result of ILD. In this case the shortness of breath is the most common symptom. Oxygen therapy helps improve the breathing, but does not cure the damaged lungs. Pulmonary fibrosis can be cause by the drugs methotrexate, which is widely used for RA management. If you develop pulmonary fibrosis and take methotrexate, you should talk to your and possibly look into an alternative drug.
- **Pleuresy –** Pleuresy is the inflammation of the pleural tissue that surrounds the lungs, and can cause breathing problems and discomfort. Sometimes extra fluid can accumulate in the pleural space (around the lungs) leading to cough, breathing difficulty and collapsed lungs.

Preventing Lung Problems

The better is RA managed, the lower the risk of developing complications, including lung diseases. In addition to keeping your RA in check, be sure to:

- Avoid anything that can irritate the lungs, from smoking to environmental pollutants.
- Have regular checkups to see if your lungs are healthy, as many lung diseases can be silent. Lung diseases can be detected during a physical examination, chest x-ray or spirometry.
- Pulmonary rehabilitation techniques (see below) can help prevent lung disease as well as treating it. For example, eating healthy, exercising regularly and taking a proactive role in managing your RA by learning as much as you can about it – including lung complications.

Pulmonary Rehabilitation

Since prescription drugs don’t help much to manage lung diseases associated with RA, pulmonary rehabilitation is important. Pulmonary rehab consists of 12 to 18 sessions where you learn about various lung diseases, medications, how to eat healthy, techniques to improve shortness of breath, home exercises, relaxation and

stress management techniques, and how to quit smoking and use oxygen.

Pulmonary rehab also includes exercises like treadmill or weight training. Pulmonary rehab had been found effective to better manage symptoms like breathing problems and fatigue, improve quality of life and fitness performance, and decrease stress levels.

If you need this form of therapy, check with your insurance provider, as some insurance plans (including Medicare) do cover pulmonary rehabilitation.