

RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS

What is Rheumatoid Arthritis?

Rheumatoid arthritis is a form of arthritis that causes pain, swelling, stiffness and loss of function in your joints. It can affect any joint but is common in the wrist and fingers. Rheumatoid arthritis generally occurs in a symmetrical pattern, meaning that if one knee or hand is involved, the other one is also affected.

What causes it?

Rheumatoid arthritis occurs when the immune system, which normally defends the body from invading organisms, turns its attack against the membrane lining the joints.

We do not know exactly what causes rheumatoid arthritis, but some of the causes may be:

- Genetic (Inherited) factors
- Environmental factors e.g. viral or bacterial infections. It must be noted that Rheumatoid arthritis is not contagious; you can't catch it from someone else
- Hormonal factors

What are the symptoms?

- Tender, warm, swollen joints
- Symmetrical pattern of affected joints
- Fatigue, occasional fevers, a general feeling of not well
- Pain and stiffness lasting more than 30 minutes in the morning or after a long rest
- Hard knobs may appear on or near the joint
- Later symptoms may include deformity of the joints such as the finger joints due to damage of the joints
- Usually rheumatoid arthritis follows a relapsing –remitting course – you may have periods of little inflammation and then have worsening symptoms, i.e. flare-ups or periods of more inflammation, pain and swollen joints. Each person's disease course is likely to be different

How is it diagnosed?

Rheumatoid arthritis may be diagnosed by a few tests and assessing the patient's clinical history and symptoms. Symptoms may be similar to other types of arthritis and it may be some time before a patient may develop most of the symptoms of Rheumatoid arthritis.

- Medical history: your doctor will ask you when the symptoms started, how the symptoms have changed over time. The doctor will also ask you what conditions anyone in your family has and what medication you use
- Physical examination: your doctor will check your reflexes and general health. He will examine your joints and observe your ability to walk and bend etc
- Tests: Some of the most common tests to diagnose and monitor Rheumatoid arthritis are Rheumatoid factor, Anti-CCP antibodies, inflammation markers such as Erythrocyte Sedimentation Rate (ESR) and C-reactive protein (CRP) and full blood count
- X-rays of the hands and feet may be helpful in diagnosing rheumatoid arthritis if these joints are affected

How can Rheumatoid Arthritis affect my health?

Rheumatoid arthritis can affect each person's life differently. In some people the disease may last only a few months or last only one to two years, then go away without causing any noticeable damage. Other people may have a mild form of the disease with periods when the symptoms are worse (flare ups) and periods when they feel well. Other people may have a severe form of the disease that is active most of the time and lasts for many years or a lifetime, and it may lead to serious joint damage.

Although Rheumatoid arthritis is primarily a disease of the joints, it may affect your general well-being. People may also experience depression, low self esteem and pain. Rheumatoid arthritis can also affect virtually all aspects of a person's life, from work life to family life.

Treatment

Current treatment of rheumatoid arthritis focuses on relieving pain, reducing inflammation, slowing or stopping joint damage and improving your functioning and sense of well-being.

Certain activities can help improve your ability to function independently and maintain a positive outlook.

Rest and exercise: you need a good balance between rest and exercise. Rest helps to reduce inflammation and pain and to fight fatigue. Exercise helps to maintain strong muscles, preserving joint mobility and maintain flexibility.

Reduce stress: learn to control stress in your life through stress reduction techniques. Stress may make it difficult to cope with living with Rheumatoid arthritis and it may make it difficult to manage pain associated with Rheumatoid arthritis.

Healthy diet: An overall nutritious diet is recommended. If you take Methotrexate try to avoid alcohol as one of the long- term side effects of Methotrexate is liver damage.

Medicines: Most people who have Rheumatoid arthritis take medication. Some medicines such as analgesics help to relieve pain, others i.e. corticosteroids and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory agents help to reduce inflammation. Other medications such as DMARDs (Disease modifying anti- rheumatic drugs) help to slow the course of the disease. Examples include Methotrexate, Salazopyrin, Chloroquine and Arava. DMARDs can improve the symptoms of Rheumatoid arthritis. They are not painkillers but they do reduce the effects of rheumatoid disease on the joints and thus slowing the damage the effects of rheumatoid arthritis over time. They need to be taken for at least six to twelve weeks before any effect is noticeable.

The newest class of medicines are biologic response modifiers. These medicines are genetically engineered medicines that help reduce inflammation and structural damage to the joints. Examples include Enbrel, Revellex, Humira and Mabthera.

Your doctor may often prescribe a combination of medicines instead of using only one medicine alone.

Surgery: several types of surgery are available for people with severe joint damage.

- Joint replacement involves replacing a damaged joint with synthetic components. The most commonly replaced joints are those of the knee or hip
- Fusing of the bones into one immobile unit. The most commonly fused joints are those of the fingers and toes, wrists and ankles
- Synovectomy involves removing the inflamed synovial tissue around the joint

Your role in managing this condition

Although your doctor can prescribe or recommend treatments to help you manage your condition, you can take part in your own care:

- Understand your disease. This will enable you to be more informed and take care of yourself
- Learn techniques to help you reduce stress in your life as this may make it more difficult for you to manage your pain
- Learn techniques that assist with relaxation
- Keep as active as possible. Develop a reasonable exercise that you can manage in order to keep your joints flexible without placing extra stress on your joints
- Rest. Develop a good balance between rest and exercise
- Ease the strain on joints in every day, repetitive tasks by using alternative methods, this may involve using aids or adaptations at home or work that may assist you
- Keep communication channels open between you and your doctor. Discuss your concerns regarding your disease, medication etc. with your doctor
- Take your medication regularly as prescribed by your doctor
- Eat a balanced and nutritious diet

If you follow some of these recommendations this will enable you to have greater control over the disease and build a sense of confidence in the ability to function and lead a full, active and independent life.

Disclaimer

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