

# Rheumatoid Arthritis

Up to 500000 people in Ireland suffer from arthritis. Arthritis is a general term used for the condition; however there are over 100 types of arthritis. The two most common types of arthritis are osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis. In this week's article I will concentrate on rheumatoid which can be the most debilitating form of the condition. In next week's article I will concentrate on osteoarthritis, which is the most common form of arthritis.

## Rheumatoid Arthritis

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) occurs as a result of your immune system causing inflammation of the lining of a joint and the tissues surrounding it. About 1% of the population suffers from rheumatoid arthritis and 80% of sufferers develop it between the ages of 35 and 50. About 1 in 20 of affected people have a severe form of it with many joints affected.

## What is rheumatoid arthritis?

Arthritis means inflammation of the joints. Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is an autoimmune disease. Usually your body's immune system produces white cells and proteins called antibodies to destroy foreign substances such as viruses and bacteria. With autoimmune diseases, your immune system mistakes your own tissue as foreign and attacks it, leading to inflammation.

## Symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis

The symptoms develop quite slowly initially. Discomfort and some swelling in hands and feet are often the first symptoms. Stiffness, especially in the morning is a classic symptom of RA, and this stiffness often reduces during the day. The hands, wrists, feet, ankles and knees are affected in over 80% of cases. You may also feel tired and generally unwell. You may develop rheumatoid nodules - fleshy lumps that usually appear on your hands, feet and elbows. These aren't painful but may mean you have difficulty using your hands.

## Causes of rheumatoid arthritis

The exact cause is unknown but there is a genetic link as RA tends to run in families. RA is three times more common in women than in men. It's common for the symptoms of RA to improve during pregnancy - this suggests that hormones and the immune system may be involved in triggering the condition. Certain lifestyle factors such as obesity and smoking can increase the likelihood of getting arthritis.

## Diagnosis of rheumatoid arthritis

If you do have RA, it's important to start treatment soon because the earlier it's started, the more effective it will be. If not treated, the condition may lead to serious disability. It can be difficult to diagnose RA because many other conditions may make your joints painful. Symptoms are a good indicator of the condition. However X rays of your joints and blood tests such as testing for the presence of a "rheumatoid marker" or an "anti-CCP antibody" can be more conclusive in diagnosing the condition.

## Treatment of rheumatoid arthritis

### Self-help

- Find a balance between exercise and rest. Swimming is an excellent activity because it strengthens your muscles and joints without putting any strain on them.
- Losing excess weight will reduce the pressure on your joints.
- Try to eat a healthy, balanced diet and cut down on saturated fats.
- A hot water bottle is useful when joints feel stiff and painful; try an ice pack if they are hot and irritated.
- An Omega 3 fish oil has been proven to have an anti-inflammatory effect. Lyprinol<sup>®</sup> is the most potent form available for arthritis and is available in Whelehans pharmacy.

### Medicines

There is no cure for arthritis however medicines can relieve symptoms and reduce progression.

- Painkillers such as paracetamol may help to relieve pain and stiffness although they won't affect the progression of arthritis.
- Anti-inflammatory medicines, known as non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), such as ibuprofen (eg Nurofen<sup>®</sup>) reduce inflammation and so relieve pain and swelling.
- Disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs (DMARDs) such as sulfasalazine and methotrexate work to slow down the disease process and delay joint damage.
- Four new medicines, infliximab, etanercept, adalimumab and rituximab, have been developed recently. These are only used if other treatments are unsuccessful.

### Non-surgical treatments

NSAIDs are available as creams or gels that can be rubbed onto painful areas e.g. Diclac gel<sup>®</sup> although these are not usually sufficient for treating inflamed joints. In severe flare ups in specific joints, your doctor may try steroid injections into the specific joint. These provide pain relief very quickly however they do not give long term relief and cannot be given regularly.

### Lyprinol

There is a new product on the market called "Lyprinol<sup>®</sup>". It has been proven to be a powerful anti-inflammatory product which comes with none of the side-effects commonly associated with traditional fish oils or steroids or prescription anti inflammatories. Lyprinol<sup>®</sup> comes from the New Zealand Green Lipped Mussel, which has long been recognised by the Maori people for its nutritional qualities. Lyprinol<sup>®</sup> is said to be 200 to 300 times more effective than other fish oils and flax seed. As a result, Lyprinol has been shown in research to be very effective for arthritis and joint pain. Lyprinol<sup>®</sup> is now exclusively available in Whelehans Pharmacy.

**Disclaimer: Information given is general; Please ensure you consult with your healthcare professional before making any changes recommended**

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