

ARTICLE: "What Is Rheumatoid Arthritis?"

This question comes up in the clinic far too often and is something that bears discussing in this forum. Rheumatoid arthritis is a condition which is characterized by joint pain, swelling and stiffness which is regarded as an auto-immune condition that is to say that the body is mistakenly attacking it's own joints causing swelling, pain, stiffness and joint damage.

The exact causes of rheumatoid arthritis are unknown but it is believed that besides the immune system, there are environmental and genetic factors involved. Rheumatoid arthritis according to the American Arthritis Association affects 1.3 million Americans, is more common in women and also begins between the ages of 30 and 50.

How do I know if I have rheumatoid arthritis? Although it is not 100% accurate there is a genetic marker which is found in the blood in people with RA. The confusing part is not everyone with the RA marker will develop this disease. Although this is not fully understood, many believe that viral or bacterial infection could trigger the disease in people who are at risk for developing RA. RA is not contagious and occurs when the immune system mistakenly attacks the linings of joints causing them to become inflamed, swollen, painful and ultimately damaged.

Rheumatoid arthritis can affect joints in the hands and feet as well as pain in the back, a whole body feeling of fatigue as well as dry mouth or a sensation of pins and needles. The best way to obtain a diagnosis is to see a rheumatologist, a doctor specializing in the treatment of auto immune disorders. Rheumatologists can evaluate and perform blood tests necessary to properly assess the likelihood of the disorder.

Patients with rheumatoid arthritis must take special care not to damage the joints further when they are in a "flare"--a period of inflammation which comes and goes. While the joints are in "flare" the patient must take care not to stress the affected areas inordinately. Even when the joints are not in a flare, the joint protection techniques that are commonly brought up in the physical therapist's office should be followed in order to prevent joint damage. Rheumatoid arthritis can make it extremely difficult to open a jar, manage daily tasks as well as handle fine objects, pinch or grasp. Additionally, walking can become painful when the foot is involved.

As you can see, rheumatoid arthritis is a complex and difficult to manage medical condition which should be properly diagnosed by a rheumatologist before the condition has had time to worsen. For more information on finding a rheumatologist or simply learning the joint protection techniques which prevent joint damage, do not hesitate to contact the clinic for a no cost consultation.

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