

**Splurge** - Volume 5 Issue 8 (August 2010)

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## **RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS**

Rheumatoid arthritis is more common than many people know and is more serious than the merely occasional stiffening of the fingers and toes. Rheumatoid arthritis is a chronic, systemic autoimmune disease that affects the lining of the joints and is one that can have major degenerative effects on a person's health if left untreated.

Many of the early symptoms include fatigue, muscle aches and stiffness of the joints in the morning lasting over an hour (especially in the fingers, elbows, wrists, hips, ankles and toes). Other symptoms may include swollen glands, fever, pleurisy, numbness or tingling and, in later stages of the disease, nodules under the skin. Actual joint destruction can happen relatively fast after the onset of the disease – within 1-3 years – so this is a disease to be detected early. Also, make sure to keep up with your annual eye exams as this disease can affect your vision. Eye exams are also another way to detect the disease.

There are no known causes of this disease, but it does affect women more often than men. Also, smokers are more likely to contract the disease, so there's yet another reason to quit that habit once and for all. Rheumatoid arthritis is an autoimmune disease, which means that the body's immune system becomes confused and attacks healthy tissue instead of as well as unhealthy toxins.

The diagnosis is more clearly made today than in years past thanks to technology, and the treatment options are more varied, though there is no cure. There are specific blood tests that you can take to determine if you have rheumatoid arthritis as opposed to other types of arthritis. One test is called the "anti-CCP" test, and it is a simple blood test. Your physician may want more information for a clearer view of the state of your health and the extent of the disease process, so other tests may be conducted. These could include a joint ultrasound or MRI, complete blood count along with C-reactive protein, x-rays or a rheumatoid factor test.

This is a disease that requires vigilance. Regular blood and urine tests are required to see if treatment and medications are working properly and to make sure the disease hasn't spread into other organs. One of the many concerns I have of my patients who present with this disease is the possibility of one or more complications that affect the heart. Rheumatoid vasculitis (blood vessel inflammation) is potentially life-threatening and can cause bleeding ulcers, nerve problems and in some cases, heart attacks and strokes. There are a couple of other inflammatory possibilities that may cause heart complications: one is pericarditis, which is the swelling of the outer lining of the heart; another is myocarditis, which is swelling of the heart muscle itself. Both can cause cardiac events or congestive heart failure.

The good news about all of this is that the treatment options continue to improve. There are several medications that are commonly used to treat this disease; many do a great job of staving off the

degenerative effects and improving the patient's quality life. In severe cases (especially when there are joint deformities), surgery is required to ease the stress on the joints and give the patient relief from pain.

Physical therapy helps tremendously and can increase a person's range of motion and reduce pain. Occupational therapists can teach you how to protect your joints when working or doing tasks like gardening, and to reduce inflammation in your joints before and after activities. One of my favorite exercise prescriptions for all of my patients is to swim – an exercise that takes pressure off the joints and allows for a fun, aerobic workout.

For people suffering from any of these symptoms, make sure to see your physician. Early detection and treatment can make significant strides toward living a healthy, satisfying life despite the challenges of rheumatoid arthritis.

Listen to Dr. Galichia's Radio Show – "Take Your Health to Heart" every Saturday from 11 AM to Noon on 1480 KQAM in Wichita. If you have any medically related questions, please call us during the LIVE broadcast at 1-800-TALK-997 or 1-800-825-5997. You can also e-mail your questions anytime to

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