



Is It Rheumatoid Arthritis? Ask a Rheumatologist

Thursday, January 28, 2021



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Are you or someone you know suffering from stiffness, pain, and swelling around the joints? Especially in the hands, feet, and knees? What about red and warm joints? If these symptoms sound familiar, it may be time to talk with a healthcare provider about rheumatoid arthritis (RA).

What kind of healthcare provider? You should consider seeing a rheumatologist. If you think you may have RA or have already been diagnosed with this form of autoimmune

arthritis, adding a rheumatologist to your healthcare team can be a great first step.

What Is Rheumatoid Arthritis?

RA is a chronic (long-term) disease that happens when the body's self-defense (or immune) system starts attacking itself. Unfortunately, the target is the joints and the lining of the joints. It can also affect organs in the body.

We don't know exactly why the body does this, but we do know that RA is the most common form of autoimmune arthritis. It affects about 1.5 million adults in the US. Nearly three times as many women have the disease as men. In women, RA usually begins between the ages of 30 and 60. In men, it usually starts later in life.

What's a rheumatologist?

Rheumatologists are specialists in diseases that affect the joints and connective tissue. As experts in diseases like RA, rheumatologists may provide the proper diagnosis and treatment. This is important because when it comes to RA, the earlier you can identify the disease and begin to manage it, the more likely you are to prevent any permanent damage to joints.

So what makes rheumatologists experts when it comes to these diseases?

They have 2 to 3 years of specialized training in rheumatology after the training that is required to be a general physician. They have extensive knowledge about identifying and diagnosing RA and other forms of these often complex rheumatic diseases. They know the medications used to treat RA and can identify the best options for each patient. Once an appropriate treatment is chosen, they will be very familiar with how to monitor your disease, medications, and quality of life. They are familiar with how RA and other rheumatic diseases may affect different parts of the body, as well as the long-term consequences of the disease.

Preparing for your rheumatologist appointment

To make the most out of your initial appointment with your rheumatologist, you should be sure to know "your story." Where do you feel the pain? When did the symptoms begin? What makes them better or worse? How long do they last? What does the pain feel like (dull, stabbing, throbbing)? Being prepared to answer questions such as these can help your rheumatologist evaluate your disease and find the right diagnosis for you.

If you are diagnosed with RA—or have been in the past—be sure to talk with your rheumatologist about how you can help reduce the pain, swelling, and other symptoms associated with the disease.

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