



Live Well, Work Well

Health and wellness tips for your work, home and life—brought to you by the insurance professionals at Clarke & Company Benefits, LLC

Rheumatoid arthritis affects nearly 2 million Americans. It is three times more common in women than in men. While most cases are diagnosed between the ages of 30 and 60, it can affect people at any stage of their lives.

RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS

Rheumatoid arthritis, one of the most common forms of arthritis, refers to inflammation of the membranes lining the joints. It is a systemic disease that affects the entire body, including the blood, lungs and heart.

Causes

The cause of rheumatoid arthritis is unknown, but it is categorized as an autoimmune disease, which means the body's natural immune system does not operate as it should. It attacks healthy joint tissues, causing inflammation and subsequent joint damage. There are several factors that are believed to contribute to this disease, putting certain people at higher risk:

- Genetics or hereditary factors—Certain genes in the immune system may be involved in determining whether or not rheumatoid arthritis develops.
- Environmental factors—Rheumatoid arthritis can be triggered by an infection, like a virus or bacterium in people who have an inherited tendency for the disease. However, it is not a contagious disease.

Symptoms

Rheumatoid arthritis causes inflammation of the joint linings, which leads to pain, swelling, stiffness and loss of function. It can also cause inflammation of tear glands, salivary glands and the linings of the heart and lungs. Symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis differ, but commonly include the following:

- Inflamed joints that feel tender, warm and swollen
- Both sides of the body being affected at the same time
- Inflamed joints that affect the wrist and finger joints closest to the hand. Other affected joints can include the neck, shoulders, elbows, hips, knees, ankles and feet.
- Fatigue, occasional fever and a general sense of not feeling well
- Pain and stiffness that lasts for more than one hour after waking in the morning or after a long rest.

Treatment

Highly effective drug treatments are available to treat rheumatoid arthritis, but early treatment is critical. Current treatment methods focus on relieving pain, reducing inflammation, stopping or reducing joint damage and improving patient function and well-being. In addition, treatment usually involves some combination of exercise, rest, joint protection and physical or occupational therapy. Surgery is an option if joints are damaged and painful. Overall, a balance of rest and exercise can help conserve energy, as well as maintaining range of motion and use of the joints.

Self-care

The following suggestions can help improve your health, outlook and pain from rheumatoid arthritis:

- Avoid excess stress on your joints; use larger or stronger joints to carry things.
- Stay close to your recommended weight to relieve damaging pressure on hips and knees.
- Pick, pour or peel—Reach for a healthy treat like an apple or a tall glass of orange juice. Vitamin C and other antioxidants are important in reducing risk and progression of rheumatoid arthritis.
- Start with breakfast—Give up the pastry and grab some fruit. Focus on fiber and drink a tall glass of water instead of coffee.
- Get moving—Exercise to help reduce pain and fatigue, increase range of movement, and feel better in general.



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