

Louisiana Pharmacists Association

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Louisiana Pharmacists Association Educates Patients about Rheumatoid Arthritis

Nearly 1.5 million adults in the United States suffer from rheumatoid arthritis (R.A.), and women are two to three times more likely to be diagnosed than men.^(2,3) The cause of R.A. is not known.⁽¹⁾ R.A. is a chronic autoimmune disease in which the body's immune or defense system, which normally is used to protect the body from bacteria and viruses, begins to attack itself. The body's immune system attacks the synovium, the tissue that lines the joints.^(2,3) As the disease progresses, the inflamed synovial tissue releases chemicals that destroy the cartilage tissue, the cushion between joints and bone.⁽¹⁾

Symptoms of RA include: pain, stiffness, swelling, and limited motion and function of many joints. The pain and stiffness associated with the disease usually is worse in the morning, and can last from 1 hour to all day. Neck pain, dry eyes and dry mouth are also common.⁽²⁾ Inflammation of the blood vessels, the lungs, or the sac surrounding the heart can also occur.^(1,2,4) Diagnosis of RA may be difficult. Diagnosis is usually dependent on the symptoms, physical exam, and blood tests looking at anemia (low red blood cell count) and elevated Rheumatoid Factor (found in about 80% of patients).⁽⁴⁾

No cure for RA has been discovered, current treatments attempt to reduce pain, quiet inflammation, slow disease progression, improve quality of life and reduce complications.⁽⁴⁾ Non-drug treatment for RA can include physical therapy, healthy diet, stress reduction, and

weight reduction. Patient education about the disease is imperative in helping the patients cope with this disease.^(1,4) Pharmacists help patients monitor symptoms, understand drug therapies and assist in helping the patient cope.

Treatment for RA should be started as soon as RA has been diagnosed. Studies have shown that people with early treatment of the disease feel better quicker, are more active, and are less likely to require joint replacement in the future. Patients who start treatment early are more likely to achieve disease remission and improve their overall outcome.⁽³⁾

Acetaminophen is a beneficial pain reliever. Corticosteroids (prednisone, cortisol) and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (ibuprofen, naproxen) are used to help reduce the inflammation.^(2,4) Medications known as disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs (DMARDs) have been used to improve the symptoms and quality of life while decreasing joint damage.^(2,3) These DMARDs act on the immune system to slow the progression of RA. Common DMARDs used in first-line treatment of RA include: Methotrexate, hydroxychloroquine, sulfasalazine, and leflunomide.⁽⁴⁾ Methotrexate is the most commonly prescribed DMARD because of its longer history of use and lower cost compared to newer agents.

For patients who fail these treatments, other biological agents that inhibit substances of the immune system are the next step. They include; TNF α blockers (etanercept, infliximab, adalimumab), the IL-1 receptor antagonist (anakinra, rituximab) and JAK inhibitors (tofacitinab).^(2,3,4) Less frequently used medications include azathioprine and cyclosporine, gold salts, and minocycline.⁽⁴⁾

Patients should remember to visit their pharmacist if they have any questions about the disease, symptoms, and their current treatment.

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The Louisiana Pharmacists Association, established in 1882, strives to promote the interests of all pharmacists of the State of Louisiana. For more information about the LPA and its benefits, contact Julie Fuselier or Phyllis Perron, LPA Co-Executive Directors at 225/346-6883 or visit our website at www.louisianapharmacists.com.

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