
Information for Behavioral Health Providers in Primary Care

Rheumatoid Arthritis

Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA)

- Rheumatoid Arthritis is an autoimmune disease in which the immune system loses the ability to distinguish between foreign materials (antigens) and its own cells and tissues; antibodies (auto-antibodies) are produced and directed against cells and tissues that lead to inflammation, injury and pain.
- RA is a chronic health condition. No cure but many symptoms can be managed.

Symptoms of Rheumatoid Arthritis:

- Fatigue, occasional fever, general sense of feeling unwell.
- Tender, warm, swollen joints.
- Pain and inflammation in the wrists, fingers, neck, shoulders, elbows, hips, knees, ankles, and feet.
- Rheumatoid nodules (bumps under the skin that form close to the joints).
- Anemia (decrease in number of red blood cells).
- Dry eyes and mouth.
- Inflammation of the blood vessels, lining of the lungs, or the sac enclosing the heart.
- Pain and stiffness upon awakening or physical activity.

Treatment of Rheumatoid Arthritis:

Medical Management Options:

- Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) may reduce pain and inflammation.
- Disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs (DMARD) may reduce pain, prevent inflammation and slow disease progression.
- Corticosteroids may help control inflammation.

Rheumatoid Arthritis Information Sheet (continued)

- Newer medications have been developed but because they are new and more expensive other treatments are recommended first.
- Surgery to remove inflamed tissue or to reconstruct or replace affected joints.

Self-Management Options:

- Limit exposure to viral infections and other illnesses.
- Use of splints and other aids to reduce pain and joint stress.
- Modification of activities to reduce discomfort and pain.
- Management of stress, fatigue and pain.
- Occupational and/or physical therapy to learn to manage daily tasks and movement to conserve energy and protect joints.

Things for the Behavioral Health Provider to Consider:

- Chronic pain may result in depression and anxiety.
- Lack of mobility and pain may cause social isolation.
- Importance of stress management to help manage pain and fatigue.

References & Additional Information

National Institutes of Health <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmedhealth/PMH0001467/>