

Rheumatoid Arthritis: Complementary/Alternative Medicine

Fatigue, low-grade fever, weakness, weight loss, joint stiffness and vague joint pain may precede the appearance of painful, swollen joints by several weeks

Severe joint pain with considerable inflammation that usually begins in the small joints and progresses to eventually affect all joints

X-ray findings usually show soft tissue swelling, erosion of cartilage, and joint-space narrowing

"Rheumatoid factor" is present in the blood

QUICK REVIEW

- Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is an autoimmune reaction in which antibodies develop against components of joint tissues.
- RA is a classic example of a multi-factorial disease, wherein an assortment of genetic and environmental factors contributes to the disease process.
- Standard medical therapy is of limited value in treating most cases of RA, as it fails to address the complex underlying causes of this disease.
- Diet has been strongly implicated in rheumatoid arthritis for many years, both in regard to cause and cure.
- Elimination of allergenic foods has been shown to offer significant benefit to some individuals with rheumatoid arthritis.
- Altered gastrointestinal tract flora have been linked to RA and other autoimmune diseases.
- A vegetarian diet has been shown to produce significant benefits in treating RA.
- In the dietary treatment of RA, the importance of consuming a diet rich in fresh fruits and vegetables cannot be overstated.
- Several natural anti-inflammatory compounds (e.g., curcumin, bromelain, and ginger) have shown positive effects in treating RA.
- Physical therapy (i.e., exercise, heat, cold, massage, diathermy, lasers, and paraffin baths) has a major role in the management of RA.

TREATMENT SUMMARY

RA is a disease known to have many contributing factors. Effective treatment using natural therapies requires controlling as many of these factors as possible. Foremost is the use of dietary measures to reduce the causes and ameliorate the symptoms of RA. Symptomatic relief can also be attained through the use of standard physical therapy techniques (i.e., exercise, heat, cold, massage, diathermy, lasers, and paraffin baths), anti-inflammatory botanicals, and nutrients.

Rheumatoid arthritis is often an aggressive disease that needs aggressive treatment. In mild-to-moderate cases of RA, the physical measures listed in the previous paragraph are extremely effective on their own. In severe cases, NSAIDs and other drugs may be necessary—at least in the acute phase. However, we encourage our patients not to abandon the natural measures, as they will actually enhance the effectiveness of the drugs, resulting in lower dosages. When the drugs are necessary, use deglycyrrhizinated licorice (DGL) to protect against developing peptic ulcers.

After isolating and eliminating all allergens, a generally healthy diet is recommended: rich in whole foods, vegetables, and fiber, and low in sugar, meat, refined carbohydrates, and animal fats. Foods particularly beneficial for the RA patient include: cold-water fish (mackerel, herring, sardines, and salmon) and flavonoid rich berries (cherries, hawthorn berries, blueberries, blackberries, etc.).

Nutritional Supplements

DHEA: 50-200 mg per day EPA: 1.8 g per day
or flaxseed oil: 1 tbsp per day

• Niacinamide: 500 mg four times per day (check liver enzyme values in the blood every six months) Pantothenic acid: 500 mg four times per day

• Vitamin C: 1-3 g per day in divided doses

Vitamin E: 400-800 IU per day Copper: 1 mg per day

Manganese: 15 mg per day Selenium: 200 mcg per day Zinc: 45 mg per day

Betaine HCl: 10-70 grains with meals (see the chapter DIGESTION and ELIMINATION for instructions)

• Pancreatin (10 x USP): 350 mg-750 mg between meals three times per day or Bromelain: 250--750 mg (1,800-2,000 men) between meals three times per day

Botanical Medicines

The following botanicals may be used alone or in combination with others. Severe inflammation and joint destruction require more aggressive therapy.

Individuals with a history of corticosteroid use (e.g., prednisone) and those being weaned of corticosteroids should take adrenal-supportive herbs such as Chinese thoroughwax (*Bupleuri falcatum*), licorice (*Glycyrrhiza glabra*), and *Panax ginseng*. These herbs support the adrenal glands by preventing and/or reversing the adrenal gland atrophy (shrinkage) induced by these drugs.

• Curcumin: 400 mg three times per day or Ginger: incorporate 8-10 grams of fresh ginger into the diet each day, or recommend ginger extracts standardized to contain 20% gingerol and shogaol at a dosage of 100-200 mg three times per day

Chinese thoroughwax (*Bupleuri falcatum*) (dosages to be taken three times per day):

Dried root: 2-4 g Tincture (1:5): 5-10 ml Fluid extract (1:1): 2-4 ml

Solid extract (4:1): 200-400 mg *Panax ginseng* (dosages to be taken three times per day)

Crude herb: 4.5-6 g per day Standardized extract (5% ginsenosides): 500 mg 1-3 times per day Licorice (*Glycyrrhiza glabra*) (dosages to be taken three times per day) Dried root: 2-4 g

Tincture (1:5): 10-20 ml

Fluid extract (1:1): 4-6 ml j Solid extract (4:1): 250-500 mg

Physical Medicine

• Heat (moist packs, hot baths, etc.): 20-30 minutes one to three times per day

• Cold packs for acute flare-ups

• Paraffin baths (if skin irritation is caused by hot water)

• Active (or, in severe cases, passive) range-of-motion exercises: 3-10 repetitions 1-3 times per day

• Progressive isometric (and isotonic as the joints improve) exercise: 3-10 repetitions several times per day, with generous periods of rest

• Massage: once per week