

What your joints need to hear about PMBs and rheumatoid arthritis

In this issue of CMScript we discuss rheumatoid arthritis. What exactly is covered by the prescribed minimum benefits for the disease?

What is rheumatoid arthritis?

Rheumatoid arthritis is a progressive, chronic disease that damages the joints. It is an auto-immune disease which means that your body's tissue is mistakenly attacked by your own immune system. By design the immune system is there to destroy invading agents, including infections. The damage to the joints is caused by inflammation of the tissue lining the joints. Rheumatoid arthritis is systemic in that it can affect other organs in the body as well.

Rheumatoid arthritis mostly affects the smaller joints in the hands, wrists, elbows, knees, ankles, and feet. Larger joints such as the shoulders, back, neck and hips may be affected as well but are mostly affected as the disease progresses. The disease usually affects two or three joints on both sides of the body. This symmetrical image or mirror pattern is typical of rheumatoid arthritis if compared to other forms of arthritis. Rheumatoid arthritis affects more women than men and may occur at any age although it usually starts at age 35-50 years.

What is the cause of rheumatic arthritis?

The specific cause of rheumatoid arthritis is not known but factors that may contribute to the abnormal activity of the immune system include hereditary factors, hormones and possible infections.

What are the symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis?

The disease has many different symptoms, which commonly occur in the joints. The symptoms may include but are not limited to the following:

- stiff joints – the extent of movement of the affected joints is reduced. Stiffness is worst in the mornings;

- inflammation of affected joints – redness, tenderness and warmth around the joint occurs; swelling of the area around the affected joint;
- hard knobs may appear on or near the joint;
- pain may be caused by the inflammation or swelling of the joint and surrounding tissues as well as from overexertion of the affected joint;
- fatigue, fever and a general feeling of melancholy may occur; and
- later symptoms may include deformity of the joints such as ulna (bone) deviation fingers due to joint damage.
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What is covered by the PMB regulations?

The prescribed minimum benefit (PMB) regulations prescribed in the Medical Schemes Act cover the diagnosis, treatment and care of the disease. Coverage also includes the diagnosis, treatment and care of any complications that may occur either from the disease itself or from the treatment of the disease.

Rheumatoid arthritis is included in the PMB regulations under the Chronic Diseases List (CDL). This means that a specific algorithm exists for the medicine management of the disease.

Diagnosis and continuous monitoring

The tests to diagnose and monitor the condition include:

- **rheumatoid factor** – this test measures the number of antibodies that attack the immune system;

- **inflammation markers** such as erythrocyte sedimentation rate (**ESR**) and C-reactive protein (**CRP**) – their levels are usually high in rheumatoid arthritis; other blood tests test the levels of **electrolytes** (such as calcium, magnesium, and potassium); proteins may also be tested;
- **kidney and liver functions** can be checked and monitored while taking medications;
- **full blood count** – the test measures the number of each type of blood cell in your blood. The test will also indicate the presence of anaemia as well as any other abnormalities in white blood cell counts or platelet counts that could be associated with rheumatoid arthritis;

x-rays may be taken of any sites where symptoms or signs occur. Early in the disease the x-ray may be normal or show only soft-tissue swelling, but damage to the joints can still occur. Erosion of the bony part of the joint will be visible over time;

- **MRI** scans allow earlier detection of bone erosion than x-rays;
- **ultrasounds** can be used to detect and examine abnormal collections of fluid in the soft tissues around joints. Abnormal collection of joint fluid is referred to as a joint effusion;

radioactive bone scans – a special image of the entire skeleton is obtained after a small amount of radioactive isotope is injected into a vein. Diseased or damaged bone shows up in the radioisotope in a different way than healthy bone and gives a distinctive image. The test is used to detect inflammatory changes in the bone itself; and

- **bone densitometry** – this scan detects changes in the thickness of bone that may indicate osteoporosis. Osteoporosis is a complication of rheumatoid arthritis that should be monitored and treated accordingly.

Treatment and care of rheumatoid arthritis

- Current treatment methods focus on relieving pain, reducing inflammation, stopping or slowing joint damage, and improving your

functioning and sense of well-being. The following disciplines provide specific treatment and care:

- general practitioner;
- rheumatologist – a doctor that specialises in the treatment of rheumatoid arthritis;
- orthopaedic surgeon;
- physiotherapist;
- occupational therapist; and
- dietician.

The medicine management of the disease is specified in the CDL algorithm and focuses on:

- reducing the inflammation;
- preventing joint damage and disability; and
- relieving symptoms, specifically pain.

Physiotherapy and a specific exercise programme help protect and improve movement, increase muscle strength, and reduce pain.

Occupational therapy teaches you ways to use your body efficiently to reduce stress on your joints. It can also help you learn to decrease tension on the joints through the use of specially designed splints. Your occupational therapist can help you develop strategies for coping with daily life by adapting to your environment and using different assistive devices.

A dietician assists you to change your diet and if necessary to lose weight. A diet rich in fruits and vegetables, lean proteins, and low-fat dairy products should be followed. Make sure you are getting enough vitamin C and calcium. Weight reduction helps to take stress off joints and reduce pain.

References:

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