Rheumatoid arthritis and fatigue

Essential facts
There are nearly 690,000 people in the UK with rheumatoid arthritis, a chronic autoimmune disease. Many of these people experience pain, inflammation, stiffness, reduced mobility and joint function, and fatigue.

What’s new
The major impact of fatigue on people with rheumatoid arthritis has been uncovered by a new survey from the National Rheumatoid Arthritis Society (NRAS).

The survey of almost 2,000 people found that around nine out of ten people with the disease have chronic fatigue, and that it has a significant negative impact on their professional and personal lives, and on their mental health.

Nine out of ten respondents said that fatigue had made them feel depressed in the previous week. About 70 per cent of unemployed working age respondents said chronic fatigue contributed to them being unable to work.

Signs/symptoms
Chronic or ongoing fatigue in rheumatoid arthritis differs from tiredness, says the NRAS. Fatigue can last for days, and come on without warning. It can prevent people from doing planned activities and everyday tasks. Lifting a cup, having a bath or brushing their hair may involve more effort than they can manage.

Causes/risk factors
Rheumatoid arthritis can affect people of any age. Around three quarters of patients are first diagnosed when of working age and women are three times as likely as men to have the disease. The NRAS says that the causes of chronic fatigue in rheumatoid arthritis are complex and not well understood. Pain, stress, depression, inflammation and disability are all factors that may contribute in varying degrees at different times. Fatigue is more common in women than men and can be more severe in the early stages of the disease.

How you can help your patient
Ask about fatigue and its effects, and take a proactive, positive approach to reducing it. While medical guidelines recommend annual reviews and self-management education to manage chronic fatigue, the NRAS survey suggests this is not reflected in patient experience. Four out of five respondents said that their healthcare professional had never tried to measure their levels of fatigue and just under half had never spoken to their specialist nurse or rheumatologist about it.

Find out more
National Rheumatoid Arthritis Society (NRAS)
www.nras.org.uk
NRAS chronic fatigue survey (June 2014)
tinyurl.com/o5yv45c
National Institute for Health and Care Excellence clinical guidelines on the management of rheumatoid arthritis in adults (February 2009)
publications.nice.org.uk/rheumatoid-arthritis-cg79
Arthritis Research UK
www.arthritisresearchuk.org
Bristol Rheumatoid Arthritis Fatigue Scales
tinyurl.com/ruhbfp
Improving long-term outcomes for rheumatoid arthritis: evidence-based care
Oliver, S. Primary Health Care (July 2010)
rcnpublishing.com/doi/abs/10.7748/phc2010.11.20.9.30.c8090

Expert comment
Susan Oliver is an independent nurse consultant in rheumatology

‘Nurses need to ask patients with rheumatoid arthritis if they are affected by fatigue. Patients will often feel generally unwell and completely exhausted, as if they have had a really bad bout of flu. Often they are worried that the fatigue could be caused by something else such as cancer, so it can be an enormous relief to understand it is connected to the rheumatoid arthritis. There is much that can done about fatigue. New treatments help to tackle this symptom. It is also closely related to pain, so this needs to be well managed.

Patients also need advice on how to minimise and manage fatigue, such as how to pace themselves during the day and get adequate rest and sleep.’