

10 things you should know about rheumatic diseases

1. Terminology, application of the terms

- **Rheumatism** refers to various painful medical conditions which affect joints, bones, cartilage, tendons, ligaments and muscles;
- **Rheumatic diseases**, also called **musculoskeletal diseases**, are characterized by pain and a consequent reduction in the range of motion and function in one or more areas of the musculoskeletal system; in some diseases there are signs of inflammation: swelling, redness, warmth in the affected areas. Rheumatic diseases can also affect internal organs;
- Some people use the word **arthritis** to refer to all rheumatic diseases. Arthritis, which literally means joint inflammation, is just part of the rheumatic diseases. Arthritis in the restricted sense primarily involves: joint pain, joint stiffness, joint inflammation, and joint damage.

2. Rheumatic disease is not a single disorder

Rheumatic diseases encompass more than 200 different diseases which span from various types of arthritis to osteoporosis and on to systemic connective tissue diseases.

3. Rheumatic diseases are among the most prevalent

In the industrialized world rheumatic diseases affect more individuals than any other disease group. In fact a third of people of all ages are affected at some point during their lifetime. In Europe almost every family is affected in some way by a rheumatic disease. Moreover, untreated rheumatic diseases may reduce life expectancy.

4. Who can be affected by rheumatic diseases?

Rheumatic diseases affect all ages and both genders, although women are more frequently affected than men.

5. Some factors can increase the risk of developing rheumatic disease

- Smoking
- Excessive weight
- Genetic factors
- Certain occupations which lead to injury and overuse of joints
- Increasing age

6. There are different symptoms to rheumatic diseases

You might suspect that you have a rheumatic disease if you have signs and symptoms which include the following:

- Persistent joint pain
- Tenderness
- Inflammation indicated by joint swelling, stiffness, redness, and/or warmth
- Joint deformity
- Loss of range of motion or flexibility in a joint
- Extreme fatigue, lack of energy, weakness, or a feeling of malaise.

7. Diagnosis and treatment

A definitive diagnosis of rheumatic diseases can be made by assessing the medical history, by performing a physical examination or ordering specific laboratory tests, and undertaking imaging investigations.

There is no single medication or treatment which is optimal for everyone. There are treatment options which help manage pain and control arthritis symptoms, many inflammatory rheumatic diseases are treated with so-called disease modifying drugs which have a more profound impact than drugs which reduce disease symptoms only; new biologic therapies are among these more effective agents.

Medications are the traditional treatment for arthritis. But there are also: injections into a joint or the soft tissues, natural treatment (acupuncture, chiropractic ...), alternative medicines and surgical options. Patients vary in their response to treatments for arthritis.

8. There are many myths and misconceptions about arthritis

There are several examples of myths and misconceptions about arthritis. These are perpetuated by the spread of inaccurate information and can keep a person away from managing the disease properly. Here are some examples:

- *Arthritis is an old person's disease.*
Fact: Arthritis can occur at any age.
- *Arthritis is induced by a cold, wet climate.*
Fact: Climate itself is neither the cause, nor the cure.
- *Arthritis is caused by a poor diet.*

Fact: There is little scientific evidence that specific food prevents or causes arthritis, there are few diseases, such as gout, where intake of certain types of food or drinks (alcohol) can precipitate an attack.

9. There is a financial impact associated with rheumatic diseases

The economic burden of rheumatic diseases is very heavy: their cost is estimated at more than 200 billion Euros per year in Europe. According to recent studies, they are the most expensive of all diseases for European health care systems.

10. Rheumatic diseases have significant impact on people's quality of life

If rheumatic diseases are not treated appropriately, daily activities such as walking, climbing stairs, cooking, and personal hygiene are affected. Rheumatic diseases can also have a profound effect on work capacity. They are the single biggest cause of both sick leave and premature retirement, causing physical disability, even amongst people of working age.