

FORWARD

WINTER
2022

NEWS AND INSIGHTS FROM THE NATIONAL DATABANK FOR RHEUMATIC DISEASES

MAKING A DIFFERENCE:
**Your Impact
on Rheumatic
Disease Research**

Learn more
on page 8 >

**Simple Steps
to Feel Better**

*Find Your
Sun*

Preventing Extra Pain
During the Coldest Months



thank
you

TO OUR PARTICIPANTS

FORWARD relies on the participation of individuals like you to make a difference. Every person who chooses to fill out our bi-annual questionnaire makes their voice heard and their experience known to the researchers and rheumatologists seeking to improve the diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of rheumatic diseases and conditions.

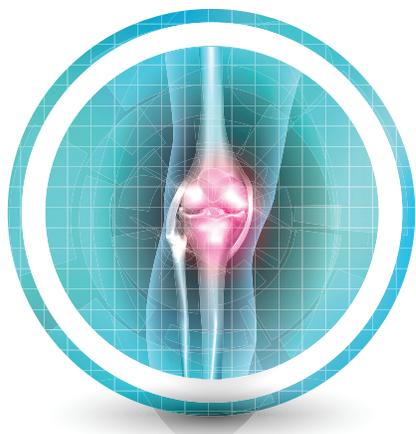
Along with the rest of the rheumatology community, FORWARD has spent much of 2021 concerned about the impact of COVID-19 on individuals with rheumatic diseases and conditions. That's why we'd like to share a very big THANK YOU to the individuals who have participated in our additional 'mini-questionnaires' specifically targeted towards understanding COVID-19 and the way it affects individuals with rheumatic conditions and their treatments and symptoms.

Additionally, many of you have chosen to participate in the Arthritis Internet Registry (AIR) by providing blood samples, allowing the FORWARD team to make incredible progress on a project that dives deep into the impact of an individual's genetic makeup on their risk of being diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis (RA) and the potential seriousness of the disease. Thanks to your participation, we have also been able to begin researching the impact that one's genetics may have on the efficacy of different medications, which we hope will help improve future rheumatology treatment.

Thank you again to all FORWARD participants, our COVID-19 questionnaire participants, and to our AIR participants who provided blood samples and made these projects possible—it could not have happened without you!

To learn more about FORWARD research regarding COVID-19, turn to page 8.





The Many Types of Rheumatic Disease

There are more than 100 types of rheumatic diseases, which can be quite confusing for you as a patient. Let's clear things up by looking at ways they are connected.

Rheumatism & Arthritis

Rheumatism and arthritis are both umbrella terms that simply refer to joint pain and inflammation.

Autoimmune Disease

Some rheumatic diseases are autoimmune diseases, meaning your immune system mistakenly attacks your body's tissues. In the case of rheumatoid arthritis, the tissues that form the lining of your joints are attacked.

Symptoms

Inflammation, stiffness, pain, and swelling of the joints are all common symptoms of rheumatic disease. However, some types of rheumatic diseases can also affect your skin, heart, eyes, lungs, and kidneys.

Flares

Rheumatic disease symptoms often come and go, alternating periods of increased or decreased activity. A 'flare' is when a patient is suffering from increased activity (more inflammation).

Diagnosis

A doctor's visit is needed if you are experiencing symptoms such as aches, pains, and/or swelling of your joints for more than a few days, especially if it is affecting your everyday quality of life. Your physician will examine your symptoms, family history, and perform a physical exam, often leading to an imaging test such as an x-ray or MRI. Your physician may then refer you to a rheumatologist.

Keep it Simple: Managing Your Chronic Illness

Many types of rheumatic diseases are chronic conditions. The good news, however, is that most rheumatic diseases can be kept in check so that you can enjoy life just like everyone else. Here are a few tips for effective management:

Develop a Good Relationship with Your Doctor

Communication is key. Come prepared with a list of concerns. Doing so will show your physician that you are invested in your health, and it will also keep you from forgetting a question (it's easy to do!). Many patients bring someone with them to help keep things on track.

Cover the Basics

Exercise, rest, and nutrition are the big three basics to keep in mind on your management journey. Did you know exercise can decrease pain and reduce symptoms? Rest and nutrition are always important, especially once adding movement to your daily routine. The smallest routine can make the biggest difference.

Take Advantage of Resources

Knowledge is the best way to manage your condition and is one of the easiest ways to sustain a positive outlook—a critical aspect to living a healthy life. Our website (forward-databank.org) and the American College of Rheumatology (rheumatology.org) are great resources. The more knowledge you have about your medications, pain management, and joint protection—to name a few—the better you'll be able to manage symptoms.



A close-up photograph of a woman wearing a blue and white patterned knit hat and a blue puffer jacket with a grey scarf. She is smiling broadly and looking upwards, her eyes closed. The background is a soft, out-of-focus grey.

Don't Let the *Winter Blues* Keep You Down

Let's face it: it's easy to get depressed during the colder, darker months of winter. And by January, most Americans are ready for winter to be over. This isn't just a common preconceived notion—more than 15,000 Americans recently surveyed reported January and February as their least favorite months of the year.

Here's what you can do when times get especially tough. ➤

As the weather turns cold, it's time to focus on doing what keeps you well—staying warm, staying active, and finding sunshine where you can.



There are many factors working against you that contribute to a winter's depression. Less sunlight results in lower serotonin levels, impacting your mood. A decrease in vitamin D can also affect your mood and serotonin levels. Finally, to top things off, your internal clock shifts with the season, affecting your hormones and sleep.

Depression and chronic pain are closely linked, so for those with rheumatic disease, these factors can make the winter months espe-

cially dark. In many ways they fuel each other: chronic pain can lead to depression and depression can exacerbate pain. According to Harvard Health, depressed patients have three times the average risk of developing chronic pain.

One possible reason for this connection is how pain and depression work. Pain is experienced by our nervous system where signals, or neurotransmitters, flow in both directions between your body and your brain. Meanwhile,

depression is tightly linked to special neurotransmitters called serotonin and norepinephrine and pain can lead to poor regulation of them by our cells. This can result in even more pain, sadness, and anxiety than normal.

Chronic pain from rheumatic disease is made worse by low temperatures and pain receptors are more sensitive. Tissues, tendons, muscles, and bones are affected by the cold, which in turn worsens RA symptoms such as stiffness and pain.

On-Hand:

These practical items will keep you healthy, comfortable, and safe during the winter months.



Heating Pad > Allows you to rotate warming up specific joints



Resistance Bands > Exercising with resistance bands is low-impact and strengthens the muscles around your joints



Epsom Salt > Pour Epsom salt into your tub before taking a hot bath to reduce swelling and soreness



Foods with Omega-3 Fatty Acids > Walnuts, avocado, chia seeds, and fish are high in Omega-3 and reduce joint inflammation

Make Your Winter a Bit Brighter

Understanding this connection can better help you fend off the winter blues. While there are many factors going against your rheumatic symptoms, there are just as many things you can do to prevent flares and depression. While exercising in the colder months may seem an arduous task, it can aid your chronic pain and seasonal depression on many levels—even if it is beginner's yoga for only 15-20 minutes in the comfort of your warm home. Movement will improve circulation, warming up your body along with your joints.

If it's not terribly cold, layering up and going for an easy walk around the block is a great way to kick depression and flare symptoms back a notch. Call a friend while you walk—friends are a source of support and accountability and sharing a laugh can change the trajectory of your day. If staying inside, pull those curtains open and let in some sunshine to brighten your day. Take vitamin D supplements to boost your immune system, mood, and help fight pain sensitivity.

With chronic illness, it can be difficult to get out of bed in the morning regardless of the season or weather, especially if in a flare, feeling a sense of depression, or both. A nifty trick to get you excited about getting up and going is to find a new hobby. Learning a new skill reignites neurons, rewiring our brain and affecting our mood. This works great for winter months when staying inside and can be as simple as learning a new dish to cook for dinner, playing a new board game, or solving a puzzle.

Recognizing the close relationship between chronic pain and depression is a reminder to be especially proactive during months when there are so many factors working against your body and your mind. Remember, winter is only one season, and it doesn't have to be the longest one. Managing your rheumatic disease and its symptoms is difficult but employing some of these tactics can make surviving the colder months of the year much easier.

“Both pain and depression feed on themselves by changing both brain function and behavior. Depression leads to isolation and isolation leads to further depression; pain causes fear of movement, and immobility creates the conditions for further pain.”

- HARVARD HEALTH

New Year's Resolutions Staying Active During Winter Months

When it's cold, getting active and staying active can be equally hard. Take advantage of these helpful ways to keep you moving:

Take a Bath

While it sounds like the opposite of moving, it actually helps get you going. Taking a hot bath will warm your body up along with your joints, alleviating stiffness and pain. If you're in a flare, this could be the one thing that gets you out of bed and your pain symptoms to a more manageable state. If you take pain medicine, it also gives it time to kick in.

Hydrate

When it's not hot outside, hydrating can be an afterthought. Staying properly hydrated keeps you active, as dehydration intensifies pain sensitivity.

Layer Up

When choosing your clothes for the day, or your workout, keep your joints or areas of pain top of mind. Wear multiple layers to keep you warm. Even if you're avoiding the cold, you can still wear gloves inside to keep your hands warm while doing everyday tasks like laundry, cleaning, or exercising.

Go Low-Impact

Low-impact aerobic exercises are the easiest on your joints. Try doing a quick yoga session to loosen up before going for a walk. Finding an indoor, heated swimming pool to frequent is a great way to beat the cold.

