

The Dental Disease Connection to Rheumatoid Arthritis, Osteoarthritis and Joint Replacement

Bacteria cause cavities and gum diseases! The germs can infect joint replacements or other parts of the body, especially when resistance to infection is reduced by certain rheumatoid arthritis drugs.

Infections

If you are taking RA drugs like Humira, you have probably heard the advice, “tell your doctor if you have any infections.” While you may not have thought to mention dental cavities or sore puffy gums, these are actually infections caused by bacteria. To avoid serious complications, cavities and gum diseases should be treated, and ideally prevented with good oral hygiene.

Dry mouth

Many medications can cause a dry mouth. And some people with RA can develop Sjogren’s Syndrome, another disease that can cause a “dry mouth” by reducing our ability to produce saliva. Because saliva helps prevent cavities and gum diseases, a “dry mouth” encourages development of those problems. Ask your dentist if a high-concentration fluoride toothpaste or fluoride rinse would be useful, as well as an “artificial saliva” product. Avoid alcohol-containing rinses as they can be irritating.

Risk to joint replacements

If you have had a joint replacement, excellent dental health and oral hygiene is particularly important. If the bacteria causing dental infections get into the blood stream, they can attach to your artificial hip, knee, or other joint replacement. Treating an infected device can require massive doses of antibiotics, and possibly even surgery to replace it, followed by more physical therapy.

All dental infections should be treated before any joint replacement surgery. Ask your orthopedic surgeon and dentist if regular, non-emergency dental appointments, including cleanings, should be postponed for a few months following joint replacement surgery.

Dental Appointments

- » **Bleeding.** Aspirin and ibuprofen, such as Advil, are used to control the pain and stiffness of arthritic diseases. However, with ongoing use they can have side effects, including prolonged bleeding. Inform your dentist about use of those drugs because some dental procedures can cause some bleeding.
- » **Frequency of appointments.** Dental diseases can be prevented with excellent oral hygiene supplemented as necessary with fluoride and/or antimicrobial rinses. However, should dental problems occur, early identification and treatment are important. Talk to your dentist about the frequency that you should be scheduled for exams.
- » **Comfort.** Inform your dentist how appointments can be more comfortable. If arthritis is effecting your jaws, for example, holding your mouth open for long periods can be difficult. Short appointments may be preferred. And if being reclined in the dental chair becomes uncomfortable, ask that it be adjusted so you're seated more upright. Bringing a couple of pillows to put under your knees may be helpful, too.

Oral Hygiene

- » **Avoid fatigue.** Should rheumatoid arthritis and osteoarthritis begin to affect your hands, flossing and brushing can become progressively challenging. You might be tempted to skip brushing and flossing but it's essential to remove bacteria from the surfaces of the teeth each day to prevent cavities and gum diseases.
- » **Make Modifications.** Grasping a narrow toothbrush handle may be difficult. If so, your dentist can enlarge it with additional plastic, or the grip of a bicycle handle by filling it with plaster. Electric toothbrushes have larger handles, and they may make brushing easier.
- » **Use fluoridated toothpaste** that also has antibacterial ingredients, such as triclosan or peroxide with baking soda, to protect teeth from decay and also kill bacteria not removed with brushing and flossing. Ask your dentist if a fluoride and/or an antimicrobial—a type of ingredient—mouth rinse would be helpful if arthritic hands make brushing and flossing less effective.

YOUR FEEDBACK IS IMPORTANT

Please type in this website and take a quick 2-3 minute survey to help us improve our communications about this important topic.



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