

by Shaili Deveshwar, MD, FACR,
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Do you have a question related
to this column or a general
orthopedic question you would
like to have answered in a
future issue? Send an e-mail
to [AskPiedmont-Ortho@
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Q. I was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis (RA) about 4 years ago. My rheumatologist prescribed several drugs, but they aren't helping any more. My pain, stiffness and swelling are getting worse. Is there anything that might help?

A. Yes, your rheumatologist may want to consider a group of drugs called biologics if traditional therapy, such as Methotrexate, has failed. Biologics are extremely effective in RA patients who have worsening symptoms that interfere with their quality of life.

RA is a chronic inflammatory disease in which the immune system attacks the body, especially targeting a membrane that lines the joints. This leads to pain, swelling and permanent joint damage. Over time, the inflammation also may affect organs. Biologics can help prevent structural damage, ultimately lessening pain and improving quality of life.

There are different classes of biologics, including some that can be given as injections and others that are given via intravenous (IV) infusion. We use both methods in people with aggressive RA.

We provide infusion therapy in the office. Patients find in-office infusions more convenient. A nurse oversees the infusion as the patient rests comfortably in our infusion suite, and I am available on-site if questions arise.

We monitor the effect of therapy by using an in-office ultrasound machine. Ultrasound is very helpful in finding even mild inflammation and early damage to the joint, which is usually missed on examination or on X-ray. This helps us to adjust the dose of the therapy and switch to more effective therapy as needed to control RA.

So the answer to your question is: Treatment with biologics should help with your symptoms and allow you to lead a more normal life.

Q. I'm a 31-year-old woman who has been experiencing fatigue and hair loss, and now I have developed sores in my mouth. Could these be related? What could be causing this?

A. Yes, they might be related. You should see a rheumatologist soon for an examination. The symptoms you describe can be signs of systemic lupus, an autoimmune disease that is diagnosed most often in women of child-bearing age, although it can occur later and can occur in men as well. Other common symptoms include joint pain, large lymph nodes, fever, sensitivity to the sun, and a butterfly-shaped rash across your cheeks and nose.

Lupus can be a disabling and life-threatening condition if not diagnosed and treated in a timely manner, so early diagnosis is important. In lupus, the body's immune system attacks healthy cells and tissues, which can result in damage to many parts of your body, including your skin, joints, heart, kidneys, lungs and blood vessels. To prevent this damage, we treat lupus aggressively.

At your first appointment, your rheumatologist will perform an examination, ask about symptoms, and order blood tests. The results of that blood work, in conjunction with your exam, will establish whether you do have lupus.

If lupus is your diagnosis, please know that it is a very manageable disease. Treatment focuses on the use of drugs to suppress the immune system so it will stop attacking the body. Many treatment options are available today with advances in medicine. I am involved in clinical research, so my patients sometimes have the option of participating in clinical trials of the latest lupus drugs.

With an early diagnosis and aggressive treatment, most patients can manage their lupus and enjoy a good quality of life.