



What is Rheumatism?

Englisch

The word "rheumatism" originates from the Greek word "to flow". In ancient times people thought that diseases were caused by "slimy streams" that flowed within the body from head to toe. Today we associate rheumatism with pain, that "flows" from joint to joint throughout the whole body. The WHO (World Health Organisation) uses the word "rheumatism" as a heading, under which those **diseases are defined that have something to do with the musculoskeletal system and are almost always associated with pain and functional disability.**

In ancient times one could distinguish only gout clearly from the numerous rheumatic illnesses, but today we have 4 main groups as well as many subgroups and individual diseases. There are:

rheumatoid arthritis of the adult person. The third form starts often with uveitis, and can change to a joint disease when the person is older, and can even affect the vertebrae (seronegative **spondylarthropathy**).

The **connective tissue diseases** as well as **vasculitides** (inflammation of the blood vessels) belong also in this group. Both groups of diseases can affect inner organs and blood vessels, they can become very severe, sometimes life-threatening. Often the skin, kidneys, the heart and blood-producing organs, as well as the nervous system can be affected.

Classic connective tissue diseases are: **Systemic lupus erythematosus, scleroderma (systemic sclerosis), dermatomyositis, polymyositis, polyarteritis nodosa. Sjögren's syndrome** with its symptoms of dry mouth and eye occurs occasionally with rheumatoid arthritis.

The Inflammatory Rheumatic Diseases

In this group there are illnesses that are not limited only to one or several joints, but that affect the whole body. Patients feel sick and are impaired in their daily activities, and there usually is evidence of the inflammation process in the blood.

The most known inflammatory disease is **rheumatoid arthritis**. Often there is a rheumatoid factor in the blood.

The next big group are the **seronegative spondylarthropathies**. The name indicates that the rheumatoid factor is not any more present here than in the normal healthy population and that the illness can affect the joints as well as the whole spinal column. The most common illnesses here are the **ankylosing spondylitis** and the **psoriatic arthritis**, which occurs together with psoriasis.

Further inflammatory joint diseases can occur after infections of the urinary tract or the bowels, as for instance with **ulcerative colitis** and **Crohn's disease**.

A special form of the chronic joint disease is the one that occurs already in children (**juvenile rheumatoid arthritis**) with its three principal kinds: **Still's disease** which also affects the inner organs and is accompanied by fever. The second group is very similar to the

To the group of vasculitides belongs the **polymyalgia rheumatica** which affects muscles and occurs in the aged population as well as the **temporal arteriitis**, which causes an inflammation of the temporal artery. There are other very rare rheumatic illnesses in this group, for instance **Wegener's granulomatosis** and **Churg-Strauß-Syndrome**.

Degenerative Joint and Vertebrae Diseases

The very common degenerative disease (osteoarthritis) can destroy the cartilage of the joint for instance in knee or hip. That can be caused simply by the normal aging process or through a previous traumatic event. Pain and restriction of movement take place. The causes of early onset of cartilage destruction could be either a congenital defect (hip dysplasia), a bone injury, severe strain on the joint or a metabolic disorder of the cartilage.

Our vertebrae can also degenerate faster through severe strain and bad posture. Sometimes the back-pain is so severe, that people cannot work any longer.

Soft-Tissue-Diseases

The third big group contains the diseases that are not connected with inflammation. Almost everybody has occasionally pains which pertain to muscles, tendons

and ligaments, and are often caused by irritation and strain, as for instance the so-called tennis-elbow (epicondylitis) or the painful shoulder which occurs if one has slept in an unnatural position, or the stiff neck or hip. Back-pain caused by prolonged sitting in one position (at the computer!) also belongs to this group. Sometimes certain illnesses where the nerve is pressured are included here like the **carpal tunnel syndrome** which causes a tingling feeling in certain fingers.

Most known is the **fibromyalgia** (or **fibrositis**), where in addition to pain in many areas of the body, various other symptoms are found (e.g. disturbances in the sleeping pattern).

Metabolic Diseases Associated with Rheumatic Pain

The fourth and last group contains the metabolic diseases, which also cause musculoskeletal pain. An example would be **osteoporosis**, which is characterised by a decreased mass of normally mineralized bone. It can lead to the collapse of vertebrae and therefore to strong back-pain. Osteoporosis can accompany the inflammatory rheumatic process.

Another example is **gout**, here the urate metabolism is disturbed. The concentration of urate in the blood is increased and there may also be an increase of urate crystals in the joint, which would cause an extremely painful inflammation attack. There are also a number of other crystals known, that can bring about inflammation of the joint.

Therapy and Help

Most of the rheumatic diseases are chronic, that means one can treat them more or less effectively today, but not cure them completely. In view of that fact it is very important, that the affected person not only gets professional care very early on, but also information, counselling and assistance to "self-help", so that the every-day life may continue as normal as possible.

Author: Dr. Wolfgang Brückle,
Rheumaklinik Bad Nenndorf

Translation: Renate C. Sörensen, Berlin

If you need any further information or want to get into contact with one of our self-help-groups please write – email – phone us:

Deutsche Rheuma-Liga Bundesverband e.V.
Maximilianstr. 14 • 53111 Bonn

Info-Telefon 0228 – 7 66 70 80,
Fax 0228 – 7 66 06 20

Internet www.rheuma-liga.de
eMail bv@rheuma-liga.de

Herausgeber:
Deutsche Rheuma-Liga Bundesverband e.V.

1. Auflage 2002 – 5.000 Exemplare
Drucknummer: MB 1.1/BV/04/2002

Mit freundlicher Unterstützung der Bundesversicherungsanstalt für Angestellte (BfA).

