Functional Medicine and Rheumatoid Arthritis

As we are fond of mentioning in our time together, functional medicine represents a new perspective on health and disease that is uniquely different from traditional medicine’s approach. Rather than giving a disease a name, and then providing a prescribed treatment regiment based on that disease’s name, functional medicine looks at actual individualized systems inside your body, seeking out problems and imbalances that are at the root of more complex problems. Functional medicine offers highly individualized treatment, focusing on the patient rather than the disease.

That approach helps us to understand, particularly in the case of insidious conditions like autoimmune diseases, that a person is not merely healthy one day and sick the next. The kind of changes in your body which ultimately lead to disease, including autoimmune diseases, take years to develop and will vary from person to person.

Autoimmune diseases are those in which your own immune system, the first responders that typically keep you safe by fighting infections and other invaders of your body, become confused and attach your body’s own tissue. These diseases could attack any sort of tissue – including your stomach, brain, or joints. This leads to chronic inflammation and often severe pain. One such autoimmune disease is rheumatoid arthritis, or RA for short.

According to the National Institutes of Health, more than 23 million Americans suffer from an autoimmune disease, particularly women. RA is an autoimmune disorder in which the immune system attacks your body’s joints, creating swelling, pain, and impairing your ability to move and walk easily and freely.

In conventional medicine, RA and other autoimmune diseases are typically treated with anti-inflammatory medications, pain management, and other medications. These measures will certainly offer temporary relief from symptoms, but do nothing to address the underlying cause of RA. Moreover, the medicine used to combat autoimmune diseases like rheumatoid arthritis are typically rife with side effects, and when the side effects of one medication are too severe to warrant continuing it, the patient is simply guided to a similar medication that offers the same benefit with a different side effect profile. Traditional medicine simply fails to address the origin of autoimmune diseases.

Functional medicine takes a different approach. Rather than treating symptoms, we seek out the underlying cause of diseases like rheumatoid arthritis. The healing protocol offered by functional medicine for a disease like RA is highly individualized and will vary from patient to patient, but in general patients suffering from any sort of chronic inflammation may benefit from the following three-step treatment regimen:

## Functional Medicine Treatment for Rheumatoid Arthritis Step One: Healing the Gut

Often, functional medicine looks to the health ad balance of the gut, since it impacts overall health significantly. By using supplements and herbal treatment, functional medicine replaces the unhealthy bacteria with good bacteria in the stomach and digestive system. We use a system called “5R” to address problems within the gut: Remove, Replace, Reinoculate, Repair, and Rebalance. In more details, we:

* Remove stressors which are affecting the gut negatively like “bad” bacteria.
* Replace the substances which aid proper digestion.
* Reinoculate by reintroducing good bacteria with the use of probiotics and prebiotics.
* Repair the gut with nutrients such as zinc, vitamins A, C, and E, L-Glutamine, and fish oil.
* Rebalance the gut via healthier lifestyle choices including exercise, stress management, and healthy sleep patterns.

In order to combat the issue of food sensitivities to items like dairy, added sugar, and gluten, which many people don’t even realize they have, often functional medicine will suggest a low-grain elimination diet to starve bad bacteria and allow the gut to heal. This also often has the additional benefit of coming with some weight loss during the initial weeks, something many patients will welcome. For stress management, each patient will require a different approach which may include meditation, yoga, breath work, or mindfulness practices. Talk therapy is also helpful in more severe cases.

## Functional Medicine Treatment for Rheumatoid Arthritis Step Two: Detox

Autoimmune diseases like rheumatoid arthritis are often a reaction to toxins within the body. In order to eliminate this cause of RA, often functional medicine providers will provide a treatment regiment that focuses on nutrient-dense detoxification.

* Detox diets typically include only organic foods.
* Detox diets focus on plenty of fiber, which can not only help flush out the body, but binds with toxins to ensure that they are eliminated.
* Cruciferous vegetables, such as cabbage, broccoli, and cauliflower. These vegetables contain sulforaphane which assists your body in making glutathione, a powerful antioxidant.
* Lots of filtered water.
* Nutrients such as N-acetyl cysteine, also known as NAC, which aid in antioxidant production and support the detox process.
* Protein powder which includes nutrients to assist the liver in detoxification.

Detoxification, or detoxing, is something that many people are already starting to do on their own. However, detoxification recommended by your functional medicine doctor will be specifically targeted to your own body’s conditions. In addition, detoxification is an ongoing process, not something that is done over the course of 2 weeks once or twice a year. Your body is constantly trying to remove toxins, so providing it with the best tools to do that is crucial to maintaining good health.

## Functional Medicine Treatment for Rheumatoid Arthritis Step Three: Anti-Inflammatory Diet

Anti-inflammatory treatment includes anti-inflammatory foods. These are items like cruciferous and leafy vegetables, wild fish, and fresh ground flax seeds taken in smoothies or along with juice or water. Anti-inflammatory strategies often focus on the diet, but also include taking steps to reduce inflammation in your body, including stress management, healthy sleep patterns, making sure to take some “me” time each day, and performing yoga or meditation daily. By incorporating diet, these steps, and anti-inflammatory supplements such as fish oil, many patients see a drastic improvement to their rheumatoid arthritis symptoms.

## Functional Medicine and Rheumatoid Arthritis: What You Need to Know

Functional medicine represents a powerful alternative to conventional medicine’s approach to autoimmune diseases like rheumatoid arthritis. As with any other condition, functional medicine works by seeking out the underlying causes of a condition rather than seeing to treat only the symptoms, or treating the “name” of a disease.

The process of identifying and treating the true causes of RA’s terrible symptoms takes quite a bit of detective work, accomplished by extensive laboratory testing and a multi-faceted approach to the healing process. Every patient is unique, and functional medicine offers a highly personalized approach and treatment protocol. By working with a functional medicine provider, either alone or as a supplement to your traditional medicine treatment regimen, you can uncover the problems at the heart of your autoimmune disease or other conditions, create an individualized treatment regimen, and finally start the process of actually healing, rather than merely masking the symptoms.