Study: Rheumatoid arthritis plus depression may be deadly

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Risk of mood-related mortality greater for men.

(HealthDay)—People with rheumatoid arthritis have higher-than-normal rates of depression, which could increase their risk of death, according to a new study.

The researchers looked at 530 patients, average age 60, in northern California who had rheumatoid arthritis for an average of 19 years. They were assessed for depressive symptoms in 2002 or 2003 and then followed until 2009. During that time, 63 of the patients died.

Overall, depressed patients were twice as likely to die as those without depression. The risk of death among depressed men was twice that for depressed women. Men with depression were five times more likely to die than women without depression.

Even men and women who had depressive symptoms but did not have

depression were more likely to die than those without any depressive symptoms, according to Patricia Katz, a professor of medicine and health policy at University of California, San Francisco, and colleagues.

Rheumatoid arthritis, which causes pain, swelling and loss of joint function, affects about 1.3 million Americans and occurs in women twice as often as in men. It is different from age-related osteoarthritis.

The study is scheduled for presentation Sunday at the American College of Rheumatology annual meeting, in Washington, D.C.

Katz said the findings suggest that depression and depressive symptoms are a significant risk factor for death in rheumatoid arthritis patients, although it is not necessarily part of the disease process.

"Patients need to be made aware that depression is something to pay attention to in [rheumatoid arthritis], and they need to tell their physician about it. Rheumatologists and other health care providers need to be aware of the problem of depression in the clinical setting," Katz concluded.

Data and conclusions presented at medical meetings are typically considered preliminary until published in a peer-reviewed medical journal.

And while the study found an association between depressed rheumatoid arthritis patients and risk of death, it did not prove a causal relationship.

More information: The U.S. National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases has more about rheumatoid arthritis.

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