

Surgery in patients with RA is often 'too little, too late'

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A new study published by the American Society of Plastic Surgeons reveals that one of the most common conditions caused by Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA) is best treated surgically, sooner rather than later.

Patients with RA frequently experience a debilitating condition known as metacarpophalangeal joint disease, which is usually treated by replacing the knuckle joints with solid silicone joints. However, this treatment (and others like it) has spurred great disagreement between hand surgeons and rheumatologists regarding the indications, timing and perceived outcomes of the procedure; rheumatologists tend to refer late-stage patients for surgery whereas hand surgeons believe that earlier intervention can yield more positive outcomes.

In the largest cohort study of its kind, researchers from Michigan, Maryland, and the United Kingdom evaluated the surgical outcomes of 70 RA patients who suffered from varying degrees of hand deformities. Following reconstruction, patients were separated into two groups based on the degree of deformity, and the outcomes of the reconstruction were assessed at 6 months and at years 1, 2 and 3. After reconstruction, both groups had positive self-reported hand outcomes and showed statistically significant improvement from baseline. However, researchers found that the more severe group still had significant deformities - showing that the more serious the malformation, the more difficult it is to correct.

This study acknowledges that the management of rheumatoid hand and wrist problems is challenging because of the lack of evidenced-based

research regarding the management of these difficult patients. Findings from this study support the general view of hand surgeons that surgery is beneficial to both the early stage and late stage patients. Both specialties agree that working together in a team approach will enhance the quality of life for the RA population. This study appears in the June issue of *Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery*, the official medical journal of the American Society of [Plastic Surgeons](#) (ASPS).

By the Numbers:

According to the [Arthritis](#) Foundation, nearly 1.3 million Americans suffer from RA. In 2008, more than 8,000 hand surgeries were performed due to complications from Arthritis, according to ASPS statistics.

Source: American Society of Plastic Surgeons

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