



Mothers with rheumatoid arthritis

Explore, document and share coping strategies and support mechanisms employed by mothers with rheumatoid arthritis

A RESEARCH PROJECT PLAIN LANGUAGE SUMMARY

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Institutions:	A&OV and USC
Project timeline:	2015
Grant:	\$1,500 A&OV, \$1,000 USC

Explanatory note: In 2018 Arthritis and Osteoporosis Victoria become Musculoskeletal Australia. For the purposes of this summary, Arthritis and Osteoporosis Victoria will continue to be used.

Background

In March 2015 Arthritis and Osteoporosis Victoria (A&OV) provided a partnership research grant to the University of the Sunshine Coast (USC) researchers titled “Explore, document and share coping strategies and support mechanisms employed by mothers with rheumatoid arthritis (RA)”.

The aim of the project was to gather and share the personal stories of mothers with RA regarding their coping and supportive strategies relating to parenting, working, studying and maintaining friendships and relationships alongside managing the impacts of their RA.

At the time the project was undertaken there was limited research in Australia and overseas exploring how mothers with RA cope day-to-day and are supported to manage.

Rheumatoid arthritis and women

Rheumatoid arthritis is an autoimmune disease associated with systemic inflammation that causes joint pain and destruction if left untreated, especially in the small joints in the hands and feet. Other organs of the body may also be affected.

In 2011-2012 445,000 Australian reported having RA; of those 5 out of 8 people with RA are womenⁱ. The prevalence of RA is expected to rise by 40% in coming decadesⁱⁱ.

Onset of rheumatoid arthritis most frequently occurs in those aged 35–64ⁱⁱⁱ and can therefore have a large impact on women in their reproductive years^{iv}. Research conducted by A&OV and its partners have identified that women in this age group with RA have specific information needs related to their condition and its impact on pregnancy, breastfeeding and early parenting^{iv}.

The project

USC researchers filmed four mothers with RA living on the Sunshine Coast (QLD) (aged 33 – 46 years) with children ranging in age from 4 months to 25 years.

The women shared their experiences of living with RA while managing parenting. They spoke openly about their physical and emotional coping strategies, their main supports and how they carry out parenting, home and work responsibilities alongside managing the impacts of RA. Informal interviews, with limited interruption from the researchers, allowed the mothers to freely discuss their own coping and supportive strategies.

Findings

Audio-visual footage captured the everyday lives of mothers with RA. A common theme emerged from these interviews-- effective practical strategies can equal a greater sense of control for mothers. The women reported that effectively managing the impacts of RA alongside a mothering role positively impacted on their own and their family's well-being.

Three central themes emerged from the mothers' stories: personal stories of living with RA, practical strategies used and preferred emotional coping strategies. Involving mothers with RA to develop strategies to assist other mothers allows wisdom to be shared not just with mothers but families, friends, employers and health professionals.

Practical strategies when shared can provide tools for new mothers or women contemplating pregnancy. Having a 'toolkit' of strategies can not only provide practical solutions but may also reduce feelings of anxiety and depression surrounding motherhood. Additionally, successfully managing an issue, such as how to safely hold your baby when your hands may be painful and lacking dexterity, could improve self-esteem and possibly reduce feelings of parental guilt.

The stories indicated a diagnosis of RA can come with a rollercoaster of emotions including shock, grief and distress. This information demonstrates the possible need for individual emotional support for mothers following a RA diagnosis.

Watch the video here

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5moVh_r3MV8

How we can help

Call our MSK Help Line and speak to our nurses. Phone 1800 263 265 or email helpline@msk.org.au.

We can help you find out more about:

- arthritis and musculoskeletal conditions
- ways to live well with these conditions
- managing your pain
- upcoming webinars, seminars and other events.

ⁱ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. Musculoskeletal fact sheet: rheumatoid arthritis. Canberra: AIHW; 2015.

ⁱⁱ Arthritis and Osteoporosis Victoria. A problem worth solving. The rising cost of musculoskeletal conditions in Australia. Melbourne: A&OV; 2013.

ⁱⁱⁱ Who gets rheumatoid arthritis? AIHW, 2015. (Accessed 18 June 2018, at <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/arthritis-other-musculoskeletal-conditions/rheumatoid-arthritis/contents/who-gets-rheumatoid-arthritis>).

^{iv} Ackerman I, Jordan JE, Ricardo M, van Doornum S, Briggs AM. Information needs of women with rheumatoid arthritis concerning pregnancy and post-natal care. Melbourne: A&OV; 2015.