

Dictionary of Rheumatological terms

Rheumatology

Acute - in a medical setting “acute” usually means of something which has a sudden onset, is severe and does not last long.

Acupuncture – An ancient method of pain relief that originated in China. Very fine needles are inserted into specific sites (meridians) to interfere with pain signals to the brain. Acupuncture also stimulates the release of endorphins which are natural painkillers.

Ankylosing Spondylitis - An inflammatory arthritis which mainly affects the joints in the back. This can lead to stiffening of the spine. It can also be associated with inflammation in tendons and ligaments.

Antibodies - Blood proteins that form as part of the body’s immune response to foreign or dangerous substances. Antibodies attack these foreign substances and make them harmless.

Antiphospholipid Antibody - An antibody that attacks phospholipids (a type of fat) which often make up the surface of cells. This antibody attacks the body’s own cells, rather than bacteria so it is called an autoimmune antibody.

Antiphospholipid Syndrome – A disorder in which the blood clots too quickly (sticky blood syndrome). The clotting can affect any vein or artery in the body, resulting in a wide range of symptoms. It’s caused by an antibody that attacks the phospholipids found particularly in the outer coating of white blood cells. APS can occur in lupus or on its own.

Arthritis - means disease of or damage to the joints. Although the ending – itis implies inflammation, in some forms of arthritis there is very little inflammation present.

Autoimmune disease – a disorder of the body's defence mechanism (immune system), in which antibodies and other components of the immune system attack the body's own tissues.

Cartilage - The smooth, tough material with a slippery surface which covers the bone ends. It acts as a shock absorber and allows smooth movement between bones.

Connective tissue - This term loosely describes the tissues which hold the body together. Connective tissue is present in all organs, so the term “Connective Tissue Diseases” describes a group of diseases which affect a wide range of different body systems.

Chronic - in a medical setting “chronic” refers to a condition which persists for a long time.

Disease Modifying Anti Rheumatic Drugs (DMARDs) - Drugs used to treat rheumatoid arthritis and some other rheumatic diseases. DMARDs suppress the disease and reduce inflammation. Examples of DMARDs are methotrexate, sulfasalazine and gold.

HLA-B27 (Human leukocyte antigen B27) – A gene which is often present in people who have condition such as reactive arthritis, psoriatic arthritis or ankylosing spondylitis.

Immune system - The immune system is the body's defence system against infection and other problems. It consists of an integrated network of cells and the chemicals they produce which constantly patrol the body looking for problems. When such a problem is encountered the immune system reacts by producing inflammation, the aim of which is to eliminate the infection (or other abnormality) from the body.

Inflammation - When the immune system reacts to infection or some other stimulus, the whole process is called inflammation. There is often pain, swelling, redness, and warmth of the affected part.

-itis at the end of a word means inflammation of something e.g. tonsillitis

Joints – The places where bones meet. They allow flexibility. There are different types of joint. In “synovial” joints the surfaces where the bones meet are covered in cartilage and the joint is enclosed in a capsule which is lined with synovium.

Ligaments - Tough, fibrous bands which hold two bones together in a joint.

Lupus (Systemic lupus erythematosus or SLE) - A disease in which the immune system attacks the body's own tissues. It can affect the skin, hair and joints and may also affect internal organs. It is often linked to a condition called Antiphospholipid Syndrome (APS).

Non-Steroidal Anti Inflammatory Drugs NSAIDs - A large family of drugs used to treat different types of arthritis. They reduce inflammation and control pain, swelling and stiffness. Common examples: Ibuprofen, Naproxen, Diclofenac.

Osteoarthritis - The most common form of arthritis. It causes thinning of cartilage and bony overgrowths which results in pain, swelling and stiffness. Most commonly affects the joints in the fingers, knees and hips.

Osteoporosis - A condition where bones become less dense and more fragile, meaning they are more prone to breakages or fracture.

Physiotherapist - A specialist who works to keep your joints and muscles moving through specific exercises and stretching. This will help to ease your pain and is often an important part of your treatment.

Prognosis – is the medical term for outlook, or a prediction of the likely outcome.

Psoriasis – A common skin condition sometimes associated with psoriatic arthritis. Patches of thickened, red and inflamed skin, often with silvery scales form. New skin cells are produced more quickly than normal leading to a build-up of excess skin cells.

Rheumatologist - a doctor who is qualified by additional training and experience in the diagnosis and treatment of arthritis and other diseases of the joints, muscles and bones. After four or five years of medical school, a number of years of training in general medicine, Rheumatologists devote an additional four years to specialised rheumatology training.

Rheumatism is a more general term used in the past to describe any pain in or around your bones, muscles and joints.

Rheumatoid Arthritis - A common inflammatory disease affecting the joints, particularly the lining of the joint. It most commonly starts in the smaller joints in a symmetrical pattern – that is, for example, in both hands or both wrists at once.

Spina Bifida - A defect in the spinal canal that can damage to the nerves to the legs.

Synovium - The inner layer of the joint capsule. It produces synovial fluid to lubricate the joint. This synovial fluid is produced by normal joints. When arthritis develops in a joint the synovial membrane becomes thickened and it produces large amounts of fluid. This is what causes the swelling of the joint.

Tendons - Strong fibrous cords that connect muscles to bones.