

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

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

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 women.¹ The prevalence of RA is expected to rise by 40% in coming decades.²

Onset of rheumatoid arthritis most frequently occurs in those aged 35–64³ and can therefore have a large impact on women in their reproductive years.⁴ 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.⁴

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

<http://www.arthritisvic.org.au/Useful-Information/About-Us/Video/Coping-Strategies-Mothers-with-RA>

Find out more

At Arthritis and Osteoporosis Victoria, we have a range of services and programs to help you if you have rheumatoid arthritis:

- **MSK Help Line.** For information on living with rheumatoid arthritis, assistance navigating the complex health, disability and social services systems; information on community resources in the community, call our nurses on 1800 263 265 weekdays, or email msk@arthritisvic.org.au.
- **Library.** We have resources on many different musculoskeletal conditions – including rheumatoid arthritis - as well as information on pregnancy, nutrition, exercise, pain management and treatment options, and a collection of rheumatology journals and newsletters. Access the library catalogue to see what's available - www.arthritisvic.org.au/Useful-Information/Our-Services/Library or contact the librarian on 03 8531 8031 (toll free for country callers on 1800 263 265).
- **Peer support groups** across Victoria provide information, support and understanding to members. Go to the Arthritis Map - www.arthritismap.com.au - to find the details of groups in Victoria.
- **Young Women's Arthritis Support Group** is a group specifically for women with a musculoskeletal condition. Get information, support and understanding from people who understand what you are going through. Visit their Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/ywasg> for more information.
- **Courses, seminars and webinars.** Learn practical ways to live with rheumatoid arthritis. Details of upcoming events are listed on our website. <http://www.arthritisvic.org.au/Education-and-Events>
- **Website.** Provides up to date information on issues important to people with musculoskeletal conditions: www.arthritisvic.org.au.

References

1. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. Musculoskeletal fact sheet: rheumatoid arthritis. Canberra: AIHW; 2015.
2. Arthritis and Osteoporosis Victoria. A problem worth solving. The rising cost of musculoskeletal conditions in Australia. Melbourne: A&OV; 2013.
3. Who gets rheumatoid arthritis? AIHW, 2015. (Accessed 11 August 2015, at <http://www.aihw.gov.au/rheumatoid-arthritis/prevalence/>.)
4. 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.

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