

# News

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DALLAS -- Most pamphlets explaining arthritis are written for people who read on at least a 10th-grade level. People who read less well get their information from doctors or nurses.

Unfortunately, those people are sometimes intimidated by white coats during one-on-one examinations and hesitate to ask for explanations. They never fully understand their disease or the treatment prescribed for it.

Regina Johnson, a registered nurse and clinical coordinator of the rheumatology unit of the Department of Internal Medicine at The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas, has designed an arthritis education program that is presented in simple language.

"A knowledgeable patient is more likely to play an active role in the overall management of his arthritis," Johnson said. "Lack of formal education should not be a barrier to attaining information about arthritis." This program provides the opportunity for all individuals with arthritis to become more knowledgeable about their disease.

The free, six-part program is offered to all arthritis sufferers Tuesdays at the Parkland Memorial Hospital arthritis outpatient clinic on the hospital's seventh floor.

Dr. Tom Geppert, assistant professor of internal medicine at UT Southwestern, presents facts about arthritis in the first class. Patients learn about different types of arthritis, such as rheumatoid, degenerative joint disease and lupus. They also learn about their type of arthritis, its symptoms, joint anatomy, inflammation and its relationship to symptoms, the length of the illness and treatment techniques.

Johnson discusses exercise and joint protection in the second class. Patients learn to balance rest with activity and how to make everyday chores easier by letting the strongest joints and muscles do the work.

The nutrition segment, presented by Parkland's Sheral Cade, a registered dietitian, dispels the myths that there are miracle diet cures for arthritis. A well-balanced diet that keeps weight in proportion with height is the nutritional key to coping with the disease.

Johnson also presents the medication class. Patients get detailed information about their prescriptions' effects and side effects. They are admonished to take their medicines as prescribed, not just when they feel bad.

A UT Southwestern psychiatric resident discusses the emotional, behavioral

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and social responses to arthritis. Patients learn that stress can bring a flare up, that denial can be harmful, and that fear, anger and depression are common emotions for people with chronic disease.

The last class, taught by Jessica Jones, a Parkland social worker, helps guide disabled arthritic patients through the financial-aid system. They learn about community resources, the criteria used to determine disability, the way to apply for assistance, what ends eligibility, and how to apply for health aids and occupational therapy equipment.

Although the hour-long classes are held during the arthritis clinic, Johnson makes sure the patients are seen by their doctors. "If we see that appointments are running late, we take patients into the class while they wait," she said. "A nurse's aide takes the patient out of class when it's time for him to see the doctor. They can see the doctor and go to class on the same day so they don't have to make a special trip just for class."

However, patients do not need a doctor's appointment to go to the classes. Anyone interested in the classes should call for a schedule before making the trip to Parkland. For more information, call Johnson at 214/688-3466.

The program has been a success. Last year, Johnson reached 220 patients. Attendance is up from 75 percent to 83 percent of patients registered at the clinic on class days, with some patients making special trips to class although they do not have a clinic appointment.

Johnson will present a description of the program and the results of the educational efforts at the 23rd National Scientific Conference of the Arthritis Health Professionals Association May 25-28 in Houston.

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Note: The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas comprises Southwestern Medical School, Southwestern Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences and Southwestern Allied Health Sciences School.