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Summer 2009
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Arthritis in families

Genes are not the only players

by Kely Rouba

FFor most people, holidays are a time when families gather and celebrate traditions. Holidays were no different for Seth Ginsberg, except that his family had a ritual not associated with festivities.

“I remember as a teenager taking the same medicine as my mother and grandmother at the same time. We made a ritual out of it and tried to get a laugh from it,” said Ginsberg. He was diagnosed with spondyloarthritis—a form of juvenile arthritis at the age of 13. Both his mother and late-grandmother were also diagnosed with forms of arthritis.

However, the presence of arthritis in their family was no laughing matter. “My mother was devastated when I was diagnosed with arthritis because she felt as though she had somehow passed it along to her child,” Ginsberg said, adding, “My grandmother



Seth Ginsberg, Creaky Joints co-founder, hosts a session for persons with rheumatoid arthritis to talk with experts.

had a very severe case of osteoarthritis—wear and tear on joints as a result of old age—and, sadly, lived out her days in a great deal of pain and immobility.”

Although the trio learned to make light of a difficult situation, Ginsberg said he and his mother still have days when the disease gets the best of them. Ginsberg’s mother finds that her rheumatoid arthritis (RA) affects her hands most of all. “On bad days, she has trouble with even the simplest of

tasks,” he said. “I find myself living with many of the same symptoms as my mother. My hands chronically ache, my back hurts at night, and my knees choose when they work and when they won’t.”

But the two know they can turn to each other for support. “I get my strength and courage from her and she gets hers from me. It’s how we cope.”

Realizing that not everyone with arthritis has someone to turn to for support, Ginsberg co-founded CreakyJoints



Seth Ginsberg conducts a question/answer session with Dr. Stephen Paget, Chief of the Division of Rheumatology, Hospital for Special Surgery, NY.

(www.creakyjoints.org) in 1999 to fill that void. “It’s a social network, support system, and educational resource for the arthritis community,” he said.

Over the years, Ginsberg has given many workshops to educate others about the disease and who can be affected. While RA is not necessarily hereditary, having a parent with a systemic arthritis (like RA) predisposes the children to developing

it as they grow older,” he says.

According to Mary K. Crow, M.D., professor of Medicine at Weill Cornell Medical College and director of Rheumatology Research at Hospital for Special Surgery in New York, researchers are finding that genetic factors do come into play when looking at the root cause of arthritis.

“Current studies are investigating the specific genes that

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are associated with autoimmune and inflammatory diseases, including those that involve arthritis. Genes that control production of interferon-alpha, a soluble mediator produced in the setting of viral infection, appear to be associated with SLE (Systemic Lupus Erythematosus), RA, and other autoimmune diseases," she said, adding. Based on current research, Dr. Crow says, "It is fairly common for more than one member of a family, and even extended families, to have SLE, rheumatoid arthritis,

autoimmune thyroid disease, scleroderma, or other diseases characterized by immune system alternations and autoantibodies."

On the other hand, Ginsberg says that it is fairly uncommon for multiple family members to be diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis.

"Only two to three percent of people who have a parent, sibling, child or other close relative with rheumatoid arthritis will eventually be diagnosed with the disease," agrees Carl F. Ware, Ph.D., professor and head of the Division of Molecular Immunology at La Jolla Institute for Allergy and Immunology.

According to Ware, there are five genetic risk factors known to be associated with the disease and possibly as many as 10 or more that could be contributing factors. "Genes play an important role in rheumatoid arthritis, but they are not the only players—environment and hormones are involved too," he

said, adding, "Rheumatoid arthritis is a polygenic disease, which means variations in several genes that we inherit can increase susceptibility."

However, this does not mean that the children of someone with rheumatoid arthritis will get the disease since environmental factors, such as tobacco use, also come into play," Dr. Crow said.

Genetics, along with other factors, can also trigger osteoarthritis, even though it is

not an autoimmune disorder. "Osteoarthritis, or degenerative arthritis, also has some genetic contributions and can involve multiple family members, although it is likely that the particular genes involved in OA are different than those involved in the systemic autoimmune diseases, like SLE," Dr. Crow said.

To learn more about arthritis and ongoing research, visit ANRF's website:
www.curearthritis.org *

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