



## Living with Rheumatoid Arthritis

My name is Elisabeth Gore and I am 33 years old. I am currently living with type 1 diabetes and rheumatoid arthritis (RA). RA currently affects movement of my feet, hands, wrists and one shoulder, and causes me daily pain. I am writing my story to help highlight this condition as rheumatoid arthritis is the focus of Arthritis Week 2010.

I was first diagnosed 5 years ago following a car accident. After attending extensive physiotherapy following the accident I still felt pain. The physio suggested the pain in my hand and elbow was not (and couldn't be) related to my back injury from the car accident; he suspected an auto-immune condition.

After blood tests and doctors' appointments I was officially diagnosed. My family and I were in shock to have this happen at the age of 28. I felt relief to know what was happening and why my body was feeling so sore. Now I knew what was going on I was almost happy, I then had to learn everything about RA I could!

Rheumatoid arthritis is an autoimmune disease — one where the body's immune system attacks the tissues lining the joints, causing inflammation, pain and swelling. This can cause progressive and irreversible joint damage which can result in deformity and severe disability and greatly reduce quality of life. The good news is remission is possible; something I have in my sights. I have tried different types of medication together with taking steroids; success has been varied with most having a period of feeling really well in the initial stages. In addition to medication, I adjusted my eating habits, sleeping habits and daily practices to try to combat the disease. It is not a matter, simply treating the arthritis with medication, I don't live in isolation and neither does the disease.

I come from a family who has experienced auto-immune diseases. My paternal aunt had lupus and my grandparents suffered with RA and osteoarthritis. When I was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes at the age of 25, my doctor explained this type was an auto-immune issue. Type 1 diabetes is an auto-immune disease in which the body's immune system destroys the insulin-producing beta cells in the pancreas. This type of diabetes accounts for 10-15% of all people with the disease. People with type 1 diabetes must inject themselves with insulin several times a day and follow a careful diet and exercise plan.

I inject myself 4 times a day with insulin. I wish someone would invent a syringe that can be used for my diabetes, suitable for people with RA. I am also starting a regime with a physiotherapist to help with mobility and try to do water aerobics once or twice a week. Unfortunately it isn't uncommon for people with auto-immune issues to have more than one disease to deal with.

Arthritis is a "silent disease". There may be no visual signs of this condition. I have good days and bad days. I am currently working full time for a publishing company. I have a well developed work ethic and an understanding employer which allows me to keep working. I am a Project Manager and a Business Analyst, which does allow me to sit and work. I love shoes and handbags and am trying to discover the beauty of shoes without heels; and shorter shopping trips. In the past I have tried a new type of treatment, in the form of a medication delivered intravenously.

The steroid medication will also continue. I have tried various medication and steroid combinations and decided it was now time to try something else as my knees are now impacting on my mobility. My "quality of life" is being affected and with weighing up the options changing drugs came out as the winner. I see this new step and the whole journey with RA as a balancing act between "optimism and realism".

I want to believe I will get better; tomorrow I could wake up with a spring in my step and no pain. I know it won't happen every day, so you have to prepare for the worst and hope for the best. I am grateful having the rheumatologist and GP I have, I ask to know exactly what is going to happen and the information is willingly shared. I want to emphasise that my doctors are "relationships" too. You have to look for the right ones. I kept searching until I found the ones who support me the right way.

I have a great support network with my family. I don't live with my parents or sister but I am able to call on them at any time for assistance or support, whether physical or emotional. My family is great, I sometimes think it is bad for me, I can only imagine what it does to my parents as they want to protect me.

My Mum, as any Mum would do, said she would willingly put her hand up for this disease. She went on to say "if there is a way I can take this away from you, I would". Of course there is not! When I have a particularly bad day my parents come to assist me at home. My Dad is tough, and rarely cries. Yesterday it took my parents 20 minutes to get me down the stairs due to the pain I was in, this proved too much for my Dad. So by the bottom step my Mum, my Dad and I were all in tears. I am looking for a new place to live on the ground floor to be more kind on my body.

I feel that I have quality friendships with friends who really understand my condition, which is vital to maintaining ongoing sustainable relationships. I feel "blessed" for the support from my family and friends. My family and friends are very important to my health and well being and I know just how lucky I am to have them. I am booked to attend Arthritis Queensland's first Rheumatoid Arthritis management course for 2010 and I hope to hear about the coping strategies other people employ and to share some of my own experiences. RA sufferers need to understand they are not alone and isolated. You just need to ask for help and enjoy the "good" days. I will not let RA define me.