

Antimalarial drug prevents diabetes in arthritis patients

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The use of an antimalarial medication may prevent the onset of diabetes in patients with rheumatoid arthritis, new Geisinger research shows.

Researchers examined the records of 2,093 Geisinger patients who received treatment for rheumatoid arthritis from 2000 to 2008. The study looked at, among other things, use of the medication hydroxychloroquine (HCQ) and the development of new cases of diabetes in these patients.

HCQ was developed to treat malaria but it has also been used to treat rheumatoid arthritis and other autoimmune diseases.

In patients with rheumatoid arthritis, use of HCQ was associated with a 53 percent reduction in the development of new cases of diabetes, the study found.

"Given the relative safety and low cost of this generic drug, HCQ may be useful in preventing diabetes in other high risk groups," said lead study investigator and Geisinger rheumatologist Androniki Bili, MD, MPH.

Researchers don't know how exactly HCQ prevents diabetes onset but it's suspected that HCQ improves glucose tolerance.

Dr. Bili presented the study's findings Monday at the American College of Rheumatology Annual Scientific Meeting in San Francisco.

About 23.6 million Americans have diabetes, while 1.3 million have rheumatoid arthritis.

People with rheumatoid arthritis are at increased risk for diabetes due to more sedentary lifestyle, chronic inflammation and use of steroid medications that can cause weight gain.

"We should revisit HCQ in the treatment of rheumatoid arthritis because, in addition to its disease-modifying properties, it might prevent the development of diabetes in this high risk group," Dr. Bili said.

Source: Geisinger Health System

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