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A **new study** conducted in an ethnically diverse and predominantly **low income population found that only one-fifth of rheumatoid arthritis** (RA) patients had an overall adherence rate to prescribed oral medications at 80% or greater. Findings published today in

[\*Arthritis & Rheumatism\*](#)

, a journal of the American College of Rheumatology (ACR), indicate that less than two thirds of medication regimens for non-biologic disease modifying anti-rheumatic drugs (DMARDs) were correctly followed by RA patients.

According to ACR estimates, more than one million U.S. adults experience inflammation, pain, tenderness and swelling of the joints caused by RA. While there have been advances in RA treatments—biologic therapies such as the tumor necrosis factor (TNF) inhibitors adalimumab

(Humira®), etanercept (Enbrel®), and infliximab (Remicade®)—oral DMARDs, namely methotrexate, remain the gold standard for treating those with RA. In fact, previous research has shown that biologics are more effective when taken with methotrexate, but patients must follow the prescribed medicine regimens to realize the full benefits.

For the present study, Drs. Christian Waimann, Maria Suarez-Almazor and colleagues from The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center, in Houston enrolled 107 RA patients in a two-year study that

electronically  
monitored their intake  
of oral RA medications.  
Measures of DMARD  
adherence were:

- Doses taken  
as prescribed:  
Percentage of days  
or weeks for  
methotrexate or  
prednisone in  
which the patient  
took the correct

# dose as prescribed

- Underdosing:  
Percentage of days  
or weeks in which  
the patient took  
fewer doses than  
prescribed

- Overdosing:

Percentage of days  
or weeks that the  
patient took more  
doses than  
prescribed

Of those who

participated, 87%  
were female with a  
mean disease  
activity of 8 years.  
The RA patient  
group was  
ethnically diverse  
with 65%  
Hispanic, 19%

African-American  
and 16%  
Caucasian.  
Educational status  
was low with 45%  
not completing  
high school and  
67% having  
incomes less than

\$20,000.

RA patients who  
took their  
medications as  
prescribed were  
considered

adherent—64% for DMARD therapy and 70% for prednisone. Only 21% of participants adhered to their DMARD therapy and 41% correctly

took prednisone at least 80% of the time. Patients who took their medications as prescribed showed significantly lower disease activity scores (DAS28 at

3.3) throughout the study period compared to those who were less adherent (DAS28 at 4.1). Increases in radiological damage score were also higher in

RA patients who  
were  
non-adherent.

Researchers  
report that  
adherence to oral

DMARDs and steroid therapy in RA patients with RA was low, ranging from 58% to 71%, but patients who had better mental health status and

were not widowed or separated were more likely to adhere to their medication regimen. “Our study is the first to measure drug adherence in RA

patients over the long-term, and emphasizes the importance of following the prescribed regimen to manage their disease,” concludes Dr.

Suarez-Almazor.

“Physicians should work with patients to understand their reasons for non-adherence and discuss the importance of taking medications

as prescribed to  
control RA  
symptoms and  
prevent disease  
progression.”

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