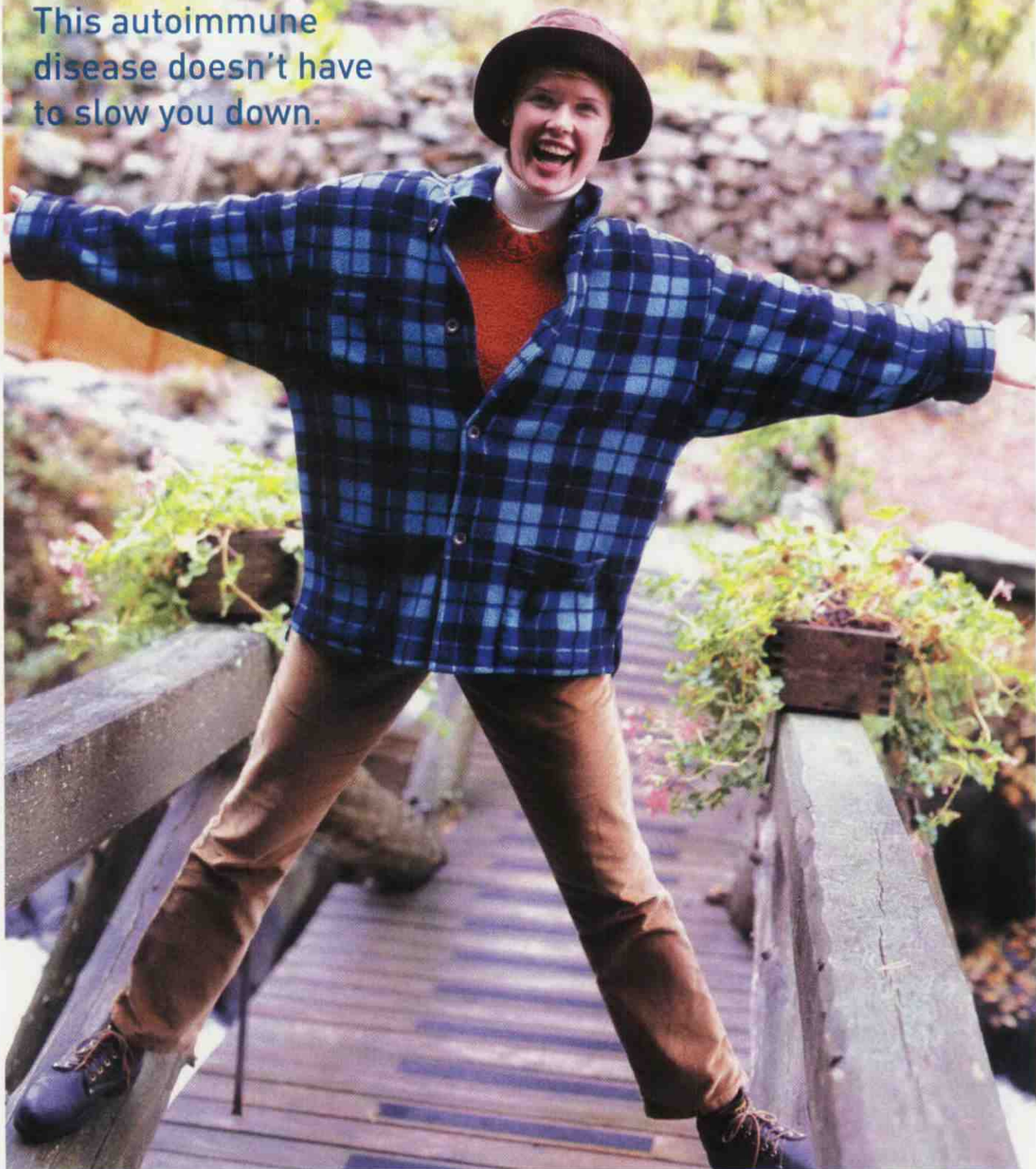


Relieve rheumatoid arthritis

This autoimmune disease doesn't have to slow you down.



Sabitri Ghosh with Zoltan Rona, MD

Tamara Nowakowsky's voice is familiar to Edmonton thrill-seekers. For the past two years this intrepid reporter has hosted a local radio program on adventure travel, taking listeners snowboarding, ice climbing, surfing, and paragliding in Alberta and around the world.

Few would guess from hearing this vibrant 30-year-old that she has suffered from rheumatoid arthritis (RA) since the age of six. That's because Nowakowsky refuses to be circumscribed by her condition. Instead, she sees it as the most challenging adventure of all—"an opportunity to test my limits," she says, "to strengthen my resolve and share what I have learned."

Rheumatoid arthritis is an autoimmune disease where the immune system attacks the synovium, the layer of tissue that encases the joints, causing them to stiffen and swell. The hands, feet, jaws, elbows, shoulders, neck, and knees are most commonly affected, but in more severe cases, inflammation can also spread to the heart and lungs. Secondary symptoms include fever, rashes, appetite loss, anemia, and fatigue. Although RA usually affects women between 30 and 60, it can strike both sexes at any age, decreasing life expectancy by as much as a decade.

The diet connection

While many researchers now believe a bacteria-carrying virus or infection initially triggers RA, there is little doubt that diet also plays an important role in its onset. Pasteurized milk and cheese, refined wheat products, food additives, chocolate, and vegetables of the nightshade family (tomatoes, eggplants, and

peppers) have all been reported to spark RA in different individuals.

A headline-grabbing study reported at the American College of Rheumatology's annual meeting in 2001 showed that decaffeinated coffee could be another catalyst in the onset of the disease. Tracking 30,000 women between 55 and 69, it found that women who drank four or more cups of decaffeinated coffee a day had a significantly increased risk of developing RA. Researchers suspect that the chemical processes used to extract the caffeine from the coffee beans may be to blame, making water-processed decaffeinated coffee a better alternative.

Conversely, the antioxidants found in green tea and olive oil could help to ward off RA. Omega-3 fatty acids—with their potent anti-inflammatory properties—can help to reduce the pain of stiff and swollen joints. The herbs ginger, oregano, and turmeric have also been known to relieve pain and inflammation in many cases of RA. Most potent of all, vitamin E taken along with prescription medicines was shown in a 2001 study, published in *Drug Research*, to lead to greater and more rapid improvement than those following a conventional treatment.

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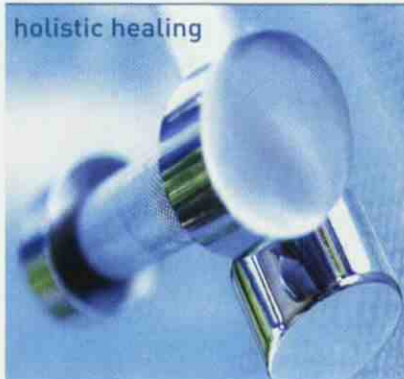


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Value of exercise

For people with RA, simply getting out of bed every morning can seem like a monumental task. Yet moderate exercise—balanced with healthy doses of rest—can increase joint function, strengthen muscles, and maintain mobility. Range-of-motion exercises at least three times a week, strengthening exercises at least three times a week, and endurance-building exercises for 20 to 30 minutes three times a week need to be included in any therapeutic regimen.

Nowakowsky says the best activities are “those that are the least jarring on the joints.” She lists swimming, simple stretching exercises, movements with light weights, working with elastic bands, and yoga as forms of exercise that offer maximum results while causing minimum pain.

If exercising outdoors, people with RA should also try to capitalize on warm, temperate days. A study released last year found that they experience increased pain on cooler days, as well as on humid ones.

Many people with RA use chiropractic, acupressure and acupuncture, bodywork, and hydrotherapy to ease symptoms by helping to facilitate better blood circulation. These therapies also reduce stress—another suspected factor in the onset of RA. “I get massages and enjoy a nice afternoon nap once in a while,” says Nowakowsky. “These indulgences help me

emotionally, providing me with valuable ‘me’ time.”

A healthy sense of perspective

Making time for others through volunteering and public speaking is equally crucial in Nowakowsky’s coping strategy. “I have a very successful, very public career,” she remarks, “and so I feel it is important to share my experiences with children, both those with disabilities and those who are able-bodied, to offer insight and inspiration for their own future.”

Despite her success as a journalist and broadcaster, RA continues to force Nowakowsky to make detours on her life’s journey. She acknowledges feeling “frustrated as I lose the ability to do things I could do last year or a few years ago and I always have the fear that I will lose what I have now. I often wonder what I will be like in five, 10, or 20 years.”

While Nowakowsky does allow herself to feel angry every so often, she says, “I never allow negative emotions to be around for very long. I quickly realize that as bad as it is for me, I’m still on my feet and able to provide for myself. Considering I’ve had this disease for 25 years, I have it pretty good.”

Sabitri Ghosh is an award-winning writer and researcher whose articles have appeared in *The Globe and Mail* and *World Vision’s Childview Magazine*.

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