

Understanding rheumatoid arthritis



What is rheumatoid arthritis?

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is a type of arthritis that causes pain, swelling, and stiffness of the joints. RA most commonly affects your hands, wrists, and feet. If RA is left untreated, your joints may become permanently damaged.[1] They may not straighten, bend, or move normally.[2]



Medical words you may hear:[3,4]

Rheumatoid	Arthritis	Inflammation
/**roo**-ma-toyd/	/ar-**thry**-tis/	/in-fluh-**may**-shun/



How does RA damage joints?

RA is a lifelong autoimmune disease that occurs when your immune system is overactive. Normally, the immune system protects against infection by causing swelling, redness, irritation, and heat. This is known as inflammation. When you have RA, the immune system attacks the body and healthy joints, causing inflammation.[2]



Why do I have RA?

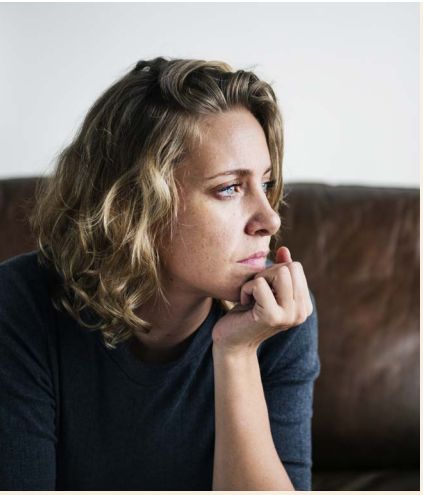
The cause of RA is not fully known. Certain genes may make you more likely to have RA. Other factors may include smoking, infection,[1,2] and changes in hormone levels.[5]

RA typically occurs in middle age. Women between the ages of 30 and 60 are more likely to develop RA than men. It is rare in men under the age of 45.[2]

What are common symptoms of RA?

- Joint pain, tenderness, swelling, and stiffness[2,6]
- Morning joint stiffness that lasts for more than 30 minutes[2]
- Loss of strength in muscles of affected joints[7]
- Tiredness[1,2]
- Low-grade fever[2]
- Loss of appetite[6]





What causes symptoms to get worse?

RA can affect people differently. Some people may experience flares, or times when their RA symptoms get worse.[8]

Although it's not always possible to know why flares happen, there are some things that may cause flares. These are called triggers.[8]

In most individuals with RA, the likelihood of experiencing a flare increases when the treatments are tapered or discontinued. It may help you to avoid a flare if you avoid these common triggers:[8]

- Infection
- Lack of sleep
- Stress
- Too much or not enough physical activity

If your RA symptoms do not improve or get worse after you start treatment, **talk to your healthcare provider.** He or she might suggest a different treatment plan.

What happens if RA isn't treated?

RA can cause permanent damage to joints and bones if it isn't treated. Joints may become deformed or stop working.[8] Proper treatment and healthy lifestyle habits, however, may help stop more damage to your joints and bones.[2]



RA may affect more than just your joints

RA impacts both body and mind. Depression is a common comorbidity that worsens health outcomes including cardiovascular disease, suicidal thoughts, and death and contributes to loss of work productivity and unemployment.[9]

Talk to your healthcare provider about risks to your heart, eyes, lungs, and other organs.[6] Keep your healthcare provider informed of any new or unusual symptoms you may have. **Ask what routine tests should be a part of your regular care.**[2]



Keep a journal

You may be able to decrease flares. Keep track of things that are stressful, what activities you do, your symptoms, and when you have flares. This may help you find some of your triggers.[2,8,10]

Talk with your healthcare provider about what you learn. Together, you can look for ways to help reduce flares.[2,8,10]

What can I do to feel better?



You can help reduce your RA symptoms by taking care of your health. Talk with your healthcare provider about how healthy lifestyle habits can help you. **Here are some examples:**[2,3,10]

Find enjoyable ways to be active

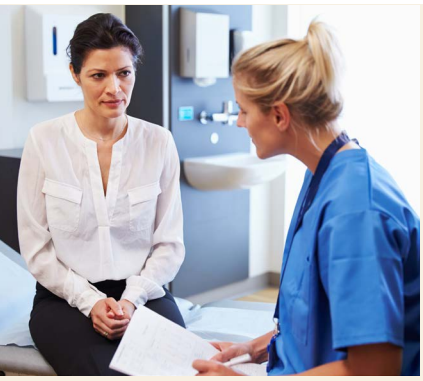
Balance being active with getting enough rest

Eat healthy meals

Choose a variety of foods, including plenty of fruits and vegetables

Find ways to reduce stress

Try yoga, relaxation techniques, or exercise



Getting treated for RA

Treatment for RA focuses on relieving symptoms and helping to stop further joint damage. Pain medicine alone does not stop or prevent joint damage and inflammation. There are other medicines that can reduce inflammation in RA to slow its progress.[10]

Talk to your healthcare provider about the treatments that are best for you.

- **Nonsteroidal** medicines are used to ease pain and swelling[10]
- **Steroids** act quickly to reduce inflammation[10]
- **Disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs (DMARDs)** are medicines that prevent further joint damage by blocking inflammation. They reduce pain, swelling, and stiffness[10]

What are the treatment goals for RA?

There is no cure for RA. However, it may be managed through lifestyle changes and medicines that target the condition and slow its progress.[2,10]



The ultimate goals are:

- To relieve the pain and swelling[2]
- To reduce the inflammation[2]
- To stop or slow down damage to joints[2]

Consider working with your healthcare provider to set specific goals, like:[10]

- Reducing the number of days I feel moderate to severe pain
- A specific decrease in the number of swollen, tender joints
- Reduced markers of inflammation in the blood
- An improved ability to perform specific activities



You and your healthcare provider will monitor your progress with those goals in mind. It is important to include goals that measure how you are feeling and your ability to perform activities that matter most to you.[10]

At each office visit, your healthcare provider may conduct blood testing and a physical exam to see if you have reached your goals. If goals are not met, medication or doses may be changed. Your treatment plan may continue to change until your treatment goals are met.[10]

Developing an RA action plan



Consider writing a few of your treatment goals in the action plan below and discuss them with your healthcare provider. **Together, you can come up with the best plan to ensure you receive the best treatment possible based on what matters most to you.**[10]

My action plan

My goal	Time frame	Action I need to take to achieve it
Sample: Reduce the number of swollen, tender joints by 50%	Within 3 months of starting new treatment plan	Start new medication

Check out these resources for more information about RA:

Arthritis Foundation®
arthritis.org

CreakyJoints
creakyjoints.org



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