



What is rheumatoid arthritis?

Rheumatoid arthritis is a disease that affects your joints. Joints are where two or more bones join together, such as at your knees, hips, or shoulders. Rheumatoid arthritis causes pain, swelling, and stiffness. If joints on one side of your body have rheumatoid arthritis, usually those joints on the other side do too. This disease often occurs in more than one joint. It can affect any joint in the body.

If you have this disease, you also may feel sick and tired, and sometimes get fevers.

Who gets rheumatoid arthritis?

Anyone can get this disease, though it occurs more often in women. Rheumatoid arthritis often starts in middle age and is common in older people. But children and young adults can also get it.

What are the symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis?

Symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis, which can range from mild to severe, include:

- Tender, warm, swollen joints.
- Swollen joints on both sides of the body, such as in both your right and left wrist.

- Swollen joints often in the wrist and finger joints closest to the hand.
- Swollen joints sometimes in other joints, including the neck, shoulders, elbows, hips, knees, ankles, and feet.
- Feeling tired and having low energy.
- Fevers.
- Pain and stiffness lasting for more than 30 minutes in the morning or after a long rest.
- Symptoms that last for many years.

What causes rheumatoid arthritis?

Doctors don't know the exact cause of rheumatoid arthritis. They know that with this type of arthritis, a person's immune system attacks his or her own body tissues. The immune system normally attacks invaders to the body, such as a cold virus or bacteria. Researchers are learning many things about why and how this happens. Things that may cause rheumatoid arthritis are:

- Genes (passed from parent to child).
- Environmental factors.
- Hormones.

Is there a test for rheumatoid arthritis?

Rheumatoid arthritis can be hard to diagnose because:

- There is no single test for the disease.
- The symptoms can be the same as in other kinds of joint disease.
- The full symptoms can take time to develop.

To diagnose rheumatoid arthritis, doctors use medical history, a physical exam, x-rays and other imaging tests, and lab tests.

How is rheumatoid arthritis treated?

Doctors have many ways to treat rheumatoid arthritis. Treatment may involve:

- Medicine.
- Surgery.
- Regular doctor visits.
- Complementary therapies.

The goals of treatment are to:

- Take away pain.
- Reduce swelling.
- Slow down or stop joint damage.
- Help you feel better.
- Help you stay active.

Medicine

Most people with rheumatoid arthritis take medicine. Drugs can be used for pain relief, to reduce swelling, and to stop the disease from getting worse. What a doctor prescribes depends on:

- Your general health.
- How serious the rheumatoid arthritis is.
- How serious the rheumatoid arthritis may become.
- How long you will take the drug.
- How well the drug works.
- Possible side effects.

How is it treated?

Surgery

There are many kinds of surgery for people with a lot of joint damage. Surgery may:

- Reduce your pain.
- Help your joint work better.
- Help you be able to do daily activities.

Surgery is not for everyone. Talk with your doctor to decide what is best for you.

Regular Doctor Visits

Regular medical care is important so doctors can:

- See if the disease is getting worse.
- See if drugs are helping.
- Discuss any drug side effects.
- Change treatment when needed.

Complementary Therapies

Special diets, vitamins, and other complementary therapies are sometimes suggested to treat rheumatoid arthritis.

Many of these treatments are not harmful, but they may not be well tested or have any real benefits.

Ask your doctor about things you can do to manage your pain, such as exercise programs, support groups, and education classes. Before starting any complementary therapy, talk with your doctor to make sure it isn't harmful.

Who treats rheumatoid arthritis?

Several types of health care professionals may treat you, including:

- Internist, who diagnoses and treats adults.
- Rheumatologist, who treats arthritis and other disease of the bones, joints, and muscles.
- Orthopaedists, who treat and perform surgery for bone and joint diseases.
- Physical therapists, who help to improve joint function.
- Occupational therapists, who teach ways to protect joints, reduce pain, perform activities of daily living, and conserve energy.
- Dietitians, who teach ways to use a good diet to improve health and maintain a healthy weight.

Living with rheumatoid arthritis

With rheumatoid arthritis, you can still lead a full life. Besides going to your doctor and therapists regularly, you can also do these activities to help reduce your symptoms.

Joint Care

Look for ways to reduce stress on your joints. Some people find wearing a splint around a painful joint for a short time helps. Talk with your doctor to see if a splint may work for you. In addition, some special equipment can help such as a zipper puller or long-handled shoe horn.

Rest

Keep a good balance between rest and activity. Try to take frequent breaks, especially when your symptoms are bothering you.

Lowering Stress

Try to lower your stress by taking the time to relax, doing hobbies you enjoy, or joining a support group. Support groups can reduce your stress by helping you to:

- Learn about the disease.
- Cope with your emotions about your symptoms.
- Feel more control over the disease.
- Build confidence.

A Healthy Diet

Eat a healthy diet which will help you manage your weight and get a variety of nutrients for overall health.

Other medical problems related to rheumatoid arthritis

You may also experience other health problems as a result of your rheumatoid

arthritis. Be sure to talk with your doctor if any of these occur.

Many people with rheumatoid arthritis may also have:

- Anemia, a condition in which your blood has a lower than normal count of red blood cells.
- Depression.
- Anxiety.

Other effects that occur less often include:

- Neck pain.
- Dry eyes.
- Dry mouth.

Very rarely, people may have inflammation of their:

- Blood vessels.
- Lining of the lungs.
- Sac enclosing the heart.

Points to Remember Friendly Title

Points To Remember About Rheumatoid Arthritis

Points to Remember Content

- Rheumatoid arthritis is a disease that causes pain, swelling, and stiffness in your joints. This disease often occurs in more than one joint and can affect any joint in the body. If you have this disease, you may feel sick and tired, and sometimes get fevers.
- Anyone can get rheumatoid arthritis, but it occurs more often in women and is most common in older people.
- Genes, environmental factors, and hormones may play roles in the development of rheumatoid arthritis.
- Treatment may involve medicine, surgery, and alternative therapies.
- Regular rest, joint care, activity, a healthy diet, and reduced stress can ease symptoms.

For more info

U.S. Food and Drug Administration

Toll free: 888-INFO-FDA (888-463-6332)

Website: <https://www.fda.gov>

Drugs@FDA at <https://www.accessdata.fda.gov/scripts/cder/daf/>. Drugs@FDA is a searchable catalog of FDA-approved drug products.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics

Website: <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs>

National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases

Website: <https://www.niaid.nih.gov/Pages/default.aspx>

National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health

Website: <https://nccih.nih.gov>

American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons

Website: <https://www.aaos.org>

American College of Rheumatology

Website: <https://www.rheumatology.org>

Arthritis Foundation

Website: <https://www.arthritis.org>

If you need more information about available resources in your language or other languages, please visit our webpages below or contact the NIAMS Information Clearinghouse at NIAMSInfo@mail.nih.gov.

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