



Points To Remember About Rheumatoid Arthritis

- Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is a chronic (long-lasting) disease that mostly causes pain, swelling, stiffness, and loss of function in joints.
- RA may cause you to feel unusually tired, to have occasional fevers, and to have a loss of appetite.
- Treatments can include medications, ongoing care from a doctor, and surgery.
- The goals of treatment are to help relieve pain and swelling, prevent, slow, or stop joint and organ damage, and help you take part in daily activities.
- You can do many things to help you cope with RA, including finding a balance between rest and exercise, keeping a healthy weight, taking care of your joints, talking with your doctors, family, and friends, and managing your stress.

What is rheumatoid arthritis?

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is a chronic (long-lasting) disease that mostly affects joints, such as the wrist, hands, feet, spine, knees, and jaw. In joints, RA causes inflammation that leads to:

- Pain.
- Swelling
- Stiffness.
- Loss of function.

Rheumatoid arthritis is an [autoimmune disorder](#) because the immune system attacks the healthy joint tissues. Normally, the immune system helps protect the body from infection and disease.

RA may cause you to feel unusually tired, to have occasional fevers, and to have a loss of appetite. It also may cause other medical problems in the heart, lungs, blood, nerves, eyes, and skin.

Treatments can help people with the disease to lead productive lives.

Who gets rheumatoid arthritis?

Certain risk factors make it more likely for you to get rheumatoid arthritis. These include:

- **Age.** You can get RA at any age; however, the risk for getting RA goes up as you grow older.
- **Sex.** Rheumatoid arthritis is more common among women than men.
- **Family history.** If a family member has RA, you may be more likely to develop the disease.
- **Smoking.** People who smoke over a long period of time are at an increased risk of getting rheumatoid arthritis.
- **Obesity.** Being obese may increase your risk for the disease as well as limit how much the disease can be improved.
- **Gum disease.**

What are the symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis?

Common symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis include:

- Joint pain at rest and when moving, along with tenderness, swelling, and warmth of the joint.
- Joint stiffness that lasts longer than 30 minutes.
- Feeling unusually tired or having low energy.
- Occasional low-grade fever.
- Loss of appetite.

Rheumatoid arthritis can happen in any joint; however, it is more common in the wrist, hands, and feet. The symptoms usually happen on both sides of the body. For example, if you have RA in the right hand, you likely also have it in the left hand.

In some people, RA starts slowly, affecting just a few joints. However, if it is not treated or the treatments are not working, RA can get worse and affect more joints. This can lead to more damage and disability. At times, RA symptoms get worse in “flares” due to a trigger such as:

- Stress.
- Too much activity.
- Suddenly stopping medications.

What causes rheumatoid arthritis?

Doctors do not know what causes the immune system to turn against the body’s joints and other tissues. A mix of genes, environmental factors, and sex hormones may lead to the disease.

Is there a test for rheumatoid arthritis?

There is no one test for RA. Doctors diagnose the disease by:

- Taking your medical history.
- Giving you an exam.
- Ordering lab tests, x-rays, or other tests.

How is rheumatoid arthritis treated?

Treatment of rheumatoid arthritis can give you relief from symptoms, improving your quality of life. Doctors may use the following options to treat RA:

- Medications to relieve pain and swelling, and to slow joint damage.
- Surgery, such as [joint replacement surgery](#).
- Ongoing care to see how your medications are working and to change your treatment as needed.

The goals of treatment are to help:

- Relieve pain.
- Decrease inflammation and swelling.
- Prevent, slow, or stop joint and organ damage.
- Help you take part in daily activities.

Who treats rheumatoid arthritis?

Diagnosing and treating rheumatoid arthritis requires a team effort involving you and several types of health care professionals. These may include:

- Rheumatologists, who specialize in arthritis and other diseases of the bones, joints, and muscles.
- Primary care providers, such as internists, who specialize in the diagnosis and medical treatment of adults.
- Orthopaedists, who specialize in the treatment of and surgery for bone and joint diseases or injuries.
- Physical therapists, who help to improve joint function.
- Occupational therapists, who teach ways to protect joints, minimize pain, perform activities of daily living, and conserve energy.
- Dietitians, who teach ways to eat a good diet to improve health and maintain a healthy weight.
- Nurse educators, who specialize in helping people understand their overall condition and set up their treatment plans.

- Mental health professionals, who help people cope with difficulties in the home and workplace that may result from their medical conditions.

Living with rheumatoid arthritis

You can do several things to help you learn about RA, take care of yourself, and keep a positive outlook.

- **Rest and exercise.** Get more rest when your RA is active and more exercise when it is not. Rest helps to lower joint swelling, pain, and fatigue. Exercise is important for keeping strong muscles, helping your joints move, and staying flexible. Doctors usually recommend low-impact exercises, such as water exercise programs. Talk to your health care providers before starting any exercise program.
- **Joint care.** Some people wear a splint for a short time to reduce pain and swelling. Talk to your doctor or a physical or occupational therapist before wearing a splint. Other ways you can protect your joints include:
 - Using self-help devices, such as items with a large grip, zipper pullers, or long-handled shoehorns.
 - Using tools that help with activities of daily living, such as an adaptive toothbrush or silverware.
 - Using devices to help you get on and off chairs, toilet seats, and beds.
 - Choosing activities that put less stress on your joints, such as limiting the use of the stairs or taking rest periods when walking longer distances.
 - Staying at a healthy weight to help lower the stress on your joints.
- **Monitoring of symptoms.** It is important to tell your doctor about any changes in symptoms or new symptoms.
- **Stress management.** The emotions you may feel because of RA – fear, anger, and frustration, along with any pain, physical limitations, and the unpredictable nature of flares – can increase your stress level. Stress can make living with the disease more difficult. Stress also may affect the amount of pain you feel. Ways to cope with stress can include:
 - Regular rest periods.
 - Techniques such as deep breathing, meditating, or listening to quiet sounds or music.
 - Movement exercise programs, such as yoga and tai chi.
- **Mental health management.** Living with RA can be hard. If you feel alone, anxious, or depressed, talk to your doctor, an RA support social worker, or mental health professional. Talk to family and friends about your RA to help them understand the disease. You may find it helpful to join an online or community support group.

- **Healthy diet.** A diet that includes a balance of calories, protein, and calcium is important for maintaining overall health. Talk to your doctor about drinking alcoholic beverages because they may interact with the medications you take for rheumatoid arthritis.

Before making any changes to your diet or activity, talk to your doctor.

For more info

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