



Rheumatoid arthritis (RA)

ICD-10-CM

Clinical overview

Definition and background

Rheumatoid arthritis is a chronic, systemic inflammatory disorder that primarily affects the joints, causing pain, swelling and stiffness. It is an autoimmune disease in which the body's immune system attacks the body's own tissues. While the inflammatory response of rheumatoid arthritis affects primarily joints, it is a systemic inflammatory disorder that can also impact organs, such as the skin, eyes, heart, lungs and blood vessels. RA usually begins after age 40, but it can occur at any age.

Causes

The exact cause of rheumatoid arthritis is not known. Some of the possible causes include:

- Genetic factors (inherited from parent to child)
- Environmental triggers
- Hormones (RA is more common in women)

Signs and symptoms

Some people with this disease experience periods in which symptoms get worse (flares) or better (remissions). Others have a severe form of the disease that is active most of the time, lasts for many years or a lifetime and leads to serious joint damage and disability. Symptoms can include:

- Joint pain, warmth, redness and swelling
- Joint stiffness in the morning or after inactivity that can last for hours
- Fatigue
- Occasional fever
- Firm lumps (called rheumatoid nodules) that grow under the skin close to affected joints
- Loss of appetite and weight loss

Diagnostic tools

- Medical history and physical exam
- Evaluation by a rheumatologist (physician expert specially trained to diagnose, evaluate and treat rheumatic diseases)
- Joint X-rays
- Blood testing for inflammatory processes in the body or certain antibodies, for example:
 - Elevated erythrocyte sedimentation rate (also known as "ESR" or "sed rate") – indicates an inflammatory process
 - Rheumatoid factor or anti-cyclic citrullinated peptide (anti-CCP) – antibodies often found in patients with rheumatoid arthritis

Treatment

There is no cure for rheumatoid arthritis. The goal of treatment is to prevent joint damage, deformity and disability. With early and aggressive treatment, many patients can achieve long periods of time when inflammation is greatly reduced or absent with no active signs of disease (remission).

The appropriate use of therapies is based on general principles that have been widely accepted by major working groups and by professional organizations of rheumatologists. These principles include:

1. Early recognition and diagnosis
 2. Care by an expert in the treatment of rheumatic diseases, such as a rheumatologist
 3. Early use of disease-modifying anti-rheumatic drugs (DMARDs) for all patients diagnosed with RA
 4. Importance of tight control with target of remission or low disease activity
 5. Use of anti-inflammatory agents, including nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) and glucocorticoids, only as adjuncts to therapy
- **Drug therapy:** Many different types of drugs are used, often in combination. Examples:
 - **Disease-modifying anti-rheumatic drugs (DMARDs)** – relieve symptoms, slow disease progression and protect joints and other tissues from permanent damage. Examples: methotrexate, Plaquenil (hydroxychloroquine), Azulfidine (sulfasalazine), Arava (leflunomide), Minocin (minocycline)
 - **Immunosuppressants** – calm the immune system, which is attacking the body's own tissues. Examples: Imuran (azathioprine), Sandimmune (cyclosporine), Gengraf (cyclosporine)
 - **Tumor Necrosis Factor (TNF)-alpha inhibitors** – inhibit the action of tumor necrosis factor-alpha, which is an inflammatory substance produced by the body. Inhibiting this substance reduces the symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis. Examples: Enbrel (etanercept), Remicade (infliximab), Humira (adalimumab)
 - **Other drugs that target a variety of inflammatory processes** – Examples: Rituxan (rituximab), Orencia (abatacept), Kineret (anakinra), Xeljanz (tofacitinib)
 - **Physical and occupational therapy**
 - **Joint surgery** – if medications and conservative measures fail to prevent or slow joint damage.



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Self-management strategies

- Regular exercise and physical activity when symptoms are controlled
- Rest when joints are inflamed, with gentle range of motion and stretching
- Application of heat or cold
- Skilled relaxation techniques
- Disease-specific patient education
- Complementary and alternative therapies – for example: acupuncture, biofeedback, yoga and dietary supplements, such as plant or fish oils

Rheumatoid arthritis versus osteoarthritis

Arthritis, by its nature, is inflammatory – it literally means inflammation of joints. Rheumatoid arthritis and osteoarthritis are two different types of arthritis. They share some similar characteristics, but each has different symptoms and requires different treatment; thus, an accurate diagnosis is important.

Osteoarthritis is the most common form of arthritis. Rheumatoid arthritis affects only about one-tenth as many people as osteoarthritis. The main difference between osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis is the cause behind the joint symptoms.

- Osteoarthritis is caused by mechanical wear and tear on joints.
- Rheumatoid arthritis is a systemic autoimmune disease. “Systemic” means the condition affects the entire body. “Autoimmune” means the body’s own immune system mistakenly attacks the body’s joints, causing inflammation and joint damage.

	Rheumatoid arthritis	Osteoarthritis
Age of onset	May begin at any time in life	Usually begins later in life
Speed of onset	Relatively rapid, over weeks to months	Slow, over years
Joint symptoms	Pain, swelling, stiffness	Achiness and tenderness, but little or no swelling
Pattern of joints affected	Often affects small and large joints on both sides of the body (symmetrical), such as both hands, both wrists or elbows, or balls of both feet	Often begins on one side of the body and may spread to the other side. Symptoms begin gradually and are often limited to one set of joints, usually the finger joints closest to the fingernails or thumbs, large weight-bearing joints (hips, knees) or the spine.
Duration of morning stiffness	Longer than one hour	Less than one hour – returns at the end of the day or after periods of activity
Presence of symptoms affecting the whole body (systemic)	Frequent fatigue and a general feeling of being ill	Whole body symptoms are not present



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Best documentation practices for physicians

Validating patient-reported diagnosis

- When a patient reports a history of rheumatoid arthritis, the physician or other healthcare provider must validate this diagnosis through review of prior medical records, diagnostic test results and consulting specialist reports.
- The medical record should document details of diagnostic work-up and the outcome of current rheumatology specialist consultations. Include the name of the consulting rheumatologist.

Subjective

In the subjective section of the office note, document any current symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis reported by the patient (joint pain, swelling or stiffness, fatigue, episodes of fever, etc.).

Objective

The objective section should include current associated physical exam findings (such as joint deformity, etc.) and related laboratory or diagnostic imaging test results.

Assessment

Specificity

- Describe the final rheumatoid arthritis diagnosis to the highest level of specificity (e.g., seropositive, seronegative, the particular joints affected, laterality, current status— active versus remission).
- Clearly link associated conditions or manifestations of rheumatoid arthritis by using linking terms such as “due to,” “secondary to” or “associated with.”
- Include the current status (stable, improved, etc.)
- Document details of any organ involvement.

Abbreviations

A good rule of thumb for any medical record is to limit – or avoid altogether – the use of acronyms and abbreviations. While “RA” is a commonly accepted medical abbreviation for rheumatoid arthritis, this abbreviation can have other meanings (for example, reactive arthritis). The meaning of an abbreviation can sometimes be determined based on context, but this is not always true.

Best practice:

- The first mention in the office note of any medical diagnosis should be spelled out in full with the abbreviation in parentheses, i.e., “rheumatoid arthritis (RA).”
- Subsequent mention can then be made using the abbreviation, except in the final assessment, where the diagnosis should again be documented in full.

Suspected versus confirmed:

- Do not document rheumatoid arthritis as a confirmed condition if it is only suspected and not truly confirmed. Rather, document signs and symptoms in the absence of a confirmed diagnosis.
- If rheumatoid arthritis is a confirmed diagnosis, do not describe it with terms that imply uncertainty (such as “apparently,” “likely,” “consistent with,” “probable,” etc.).

In remission:

Rheumatoid arthritis that is in remission but was taken into consideration by the physician or other healthcare provider when evaluating and treating the patient:

- Should not be described as “history of.” (In diagnosis coding, the phrase “history of” implies a past condition that no longer exists as a current problem.)
- Should not be documented only in the past medical history; rather, it should be included in the final impression/assessment.
- Should be described as “rheumatoid arthritis in remission.”

Plan of treatment

Document a specific and concise treatment plan, for example:

- Referral to rheumatologist
- Laboratory tests and diagnostic imaging
- Patient education, including self-management
- Clear link between the rheumatoid arthritis diagnosis and all medications being used to treat the condition
- Date or time frame for next appointment

Disease-modifying anti-rheumatic drugs (DMARDs)

The American College of Rheumatology advises that patients with an established diagnosis of rheumatoid arthritis should be treated with a DMARD, even in the first six months after the diagnosis, unless a contraindication, inactive disease or patient refusal is documented. Best documentation practices regarding DMARD therapy require the physician to document:

- a) Specific details of current DMARD therapy in the treatment plan section of the record (not simply the medication list) with clear linkage of the medication to rheumatoid arthritis; or
- b) Specific information describing any contraindication to DMARD therapy; or
- c) A notation that rheumatoid arthritis is inactive; or
- d) A statement of patient refusal of DMARD therapy and the reason for refusal.



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Best documentation practices for physicians

Electronic health record (EHR) issues

Other and unspecified codes with descriptions:

Some electronic health records insert ICD-10-CM code descriptions into the medical record to represent the final diagnosis. Examples:

M05.80 Other rheumatoid arthritis with rheumatoid factor of unspecified site

M06.9 Rheumatoid arthritis, unspecified

These are vague descriptions and incomplete diagnoses.

- Codes titled “other” or “other specified” are for use when the information in the medical record provides a specific diagnosis description for which a specific code does not exist.
- The “other” ICD-10-CM code with description should not be used, by itself, as a final diagnosis without clear documentation of the particular “other” rheumatoid arthritis.
- Unspecified diagnosis descriptions should be used only when sufficient clinical information is not known or available to the provider at the time of the encounter.

Mismatch between final diagnostic statement and EHR-inserted diagnosis code with description:

Another scenario that causes confusion is one in which the assessment section of an office note documents a provider-stated diagnosis *PLUS* an EHR-inserted diagnosis code with description that does not match or may even contradict the stated diagnosis. Example:

Assessment:

Seronegative rheumatoid arthritis multiple sites

M05.69 Rheumatoid arthritis of multiple sites with involvement of other organs and systems

Here the final diagnosis in **bold** is “Seronegative rheumatoid arthritis multiple sites, which codes to **M06.09**, Rheumatoid arthritis without rheumatoid factor, multiple sites. The EHR-inserted diagnosis code with description does not match the stated diagnosis. No information was found elsewhere in the record that clearly supported the specificity of the EHR-inserted code. This creates confusion regarding which diagnosis code should be reported.

To avoid confusion and ensure accurate diagnosis code assignment, the provider’s final diagnosis must either:

- a) match the code with description; OR
- b) it must classify in ICD-10-CM to the EHR-inserted diagnosis code with description.

Note: ICD-10-CM is a statistical classification. It is not a substitute for a healthcare provider’s final diagnostic statement. It is the provider’s responsibility to document clear, legible, concise and complete documentation of each final diagnosis described to the highest level of specificity, which is then translated to a code for reporting purposes. It is not appropriate for providers to simply list a code number with description or select a code number from a list of codes in place of a written final diagnosis.



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Tips and resources for coders

Coding basics

To ensure accurate, complete and specific diagnosis code assignment, the coder must review the entire medical record and note the exact rheumatoid arthritis description documented in the medical record. Then, in accordance with ICD-10-CM official coding conventions and guidelines:

- Search the alphabetic index for that specific description.
- Verify the code in the tabular list, carefully following all instructional notes.

Coding rheumatoid arthritis

- Rheumatoid arthritis and its associated disorders classify to the following categories:

M05 Rheumatoid arthritis with rheumatoid factor

Excludes1 rheumatic fever (I00)

juvenile rheumatoid arthritis (M08.-)

rheumatoid arthritis of spine (M45.-)

M06 Other rheumatoid arthritis

Fourth, fifth and sixth characters are used with categories **M05** and **M06** to further specify the type of rheumatoid arthritis, as well as the particular site (joint affected) with laterality (left, right or unspecified).

- **Abbreviations:** As noted in the documentation section, while RA is a commonly accepted medical abbreviation for rheumatoid arthritis, this abbreviation can have other meanings (e.g., refractory anemia, reactive arthritis, risk assessment). The meaning of an abbreviation can sometimes be determined based on context, but this is not always true. Use caution when coding RA – this abbreviation should not be coded as rheumatoid arthritis unless the individual medical record clearly shows RA is being used to represent rheumatoid arthritis.
- Severe joint pain is a characteristic of rheumatoid arthritis and is not coded separately from an already confirmed rheumatoid arthritis diagnosis.
- Do not code rheumatoid arthritis as a confirmed condition if it is documented as suspected and not truly confirmed. Rather, code the signs and symptoms in the absence of a confirmed diagnosis.

Seropositive versus seronegative rheumatoid arthritis

Seropositive – category M05:

- In most cases of rheumatoid arthritis, the patient's blood tests positive for rheumatoid factor and/or certain other antibodies (anti-CCP antibodies).
- These positive blood tests indicate the patient has seropositive rheumatoid arthritis, meaning the patient possesses the antibodies that cause an attack on joints and lead to inflammation.

Seronegative – category M06:

- Patients can develop rheumatoid arthritis without the presence of these antibodies. This is referred to as seronegative rheumatoid arthritis.
- Seronegative patients are those who do not test positive for rheumatoid factor or anti-CCPs.

Rheumatoid arthritis in remission

- Rheumatoid arthritis is a chronic and incurable systemic condition that affects the patient for the rest of his/her life.
- With early and aggressive treatment, many patients can achieve long periods of remission in which inflammation is greatly reduced or absent with no active signs of disease.
- Thus, rheumatoid arthritis described as “in remission” should be coded when it requires or affects patient care, treatment or management – as long as there are no contradictions or conflicts elsewhere in the record that suggest rheumatoid arthritis is not a true or confirmed diagnosis.

Long-term (current) use of immunosuppressant drugs

- Immunosuppressant drugs are commonly used in the treatment of autoimmune diseases such as rheumatoid arthritis for the express purpose of suppressing the immune system.
- A code for adverse effect is not assigned when the medication has achieved its intended result in lowering the patient's immune response to rheumatoid arthritis. Rather, assign code **D84.821**, Immunodeficiency due to drugs.
- ICD-10-CM does not provide a specific code to identify long-term use of immunosuppressant drugs. Assign code **Z79.899**, Other long-term (current) drug therapy, to report long-term use of immunosuppressant drugs.



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Tips and resources for coders

Rheumatoid arthritis with and without organ involvement

When a medical record documents a current diagnosis of seropositive rheumatoid arthritis of a specific joint(s) and there is no mention of any type of organ involvement, the default is “without organ involvement.” Assign a code for “with organ involvement” only when the record documents organ involvement.

Coding examples

Example 1	
Final diagnosis	Rheumatoid arthritis affecting multiple joints with polyneuropathy
ICD-10-CM code	M05.59 Rheumatoid polyneuropathy with rheumatoid arthritis of multiple sites

Example 2	
Final diagnosis	Inflammatory myopathy related to rheumatoid arthritis
ICD-10-CM code	M05.40 Rheumatoid myopathy with rheumatoid arthritis of unspecified site

Example 3	
Final diagnosis	Rheumatoid arthritis affecting the lumbosacral spine
ICD-10-CM code	M45.7 Ankylosing spondylitis of lumbosacral region
Comments	In the alphabetic index of the coding manual, Arthritis > spine > rheumatoid instructs the coder to see Spondylitis, ankylosing. Spondylitis > ankylosing > lumbosacral region leads to code M45.7 .

Example 4	
Past medical history	Long history of “rheumatism” and joint pain.
Final diagnosis	Rheumatism
ICD-10-CM code	M79.0 Rheumatism, unspecified
Comments	“Rheumatism” is a general term that describes diseases of muscle, tendon, nerve, joint or bone; symptoms include pain and stiffness.

Example 5	
Medical record documentation	68-year-old female with history of hypertension, continues to follow up here for eosinophilia and myeloproliferative disorder. Currently not on any treatment. We are monitoring her with monthly CBCs. Has previously been on prednisone, but this caused her to be very short of breath so that has been discontinued. Complains of mild low back pain when first gets up in the morning BP 120/76. HR 80. RR 14. Temp 97.8. O2 saturation 97% on room air.
Final diagnosis	1. Eosinophilia and myeloproliferative disorder 2. HTN controlled 3. RA
ICD-10-CM codes	D72.10 Eosinophilia, unspecified C94.6 Myelodysplastic disease, not classified I10 Essential (primary) hypertension
Comments	The meaning of abbreviation “RA” is not clear (could represent refractory anemia) and therefore cannot be coded. Physician query for written, dated and signed clarification is needed before coding “RA.”



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Tips and resources for coders

Example 6	
Medical record documentation	82-year-old new patient presents with complaints of intermittent right knee pain. Someone once told him that he has “rheumatoid arthritis.” Aspirin is used for pain when needed. He has never seen a rheumatologist and does not remember any lab testing. Joint exam: No upper extremity deformities. No joint effusion, warmth or reduced range of motion. Right knee with moderate crepitation on range of motion. Left knee normal. Otherwise lower extremity exam normal.
Final diagnosis	Primary osteoarthritis of the right knee
ICD-10-CM code	M17.11 Unilateral primary osteoarthritis, right knee
Comments	Do not document or code rheumatoid arthritis as a confirmed condition based on patient-reported information.

Example 7	
Chief complaint	“My hands and wrists still hurt, and I’ve lost my get up and go.” Here to review results of lab tests and X-rays ordered at last visit.
History of present illness	Lab testing was performed at her visit last week when she came in reporting that six months ago she started to feel tired and lethargic. She also noticed pain in both hands, joints of fingers and wrists, especially upon arising in the mornings— had difficulty cooking breakfast and getting dressed each morning. Also noticed pain was worse following her afternoon nap. Over-the-counter Tylenol or ibuprofen helped some, but relief lasted only two to three hours after each dose.
Physical exam	Bilateral finger joints and wrists swollen, warm and tender with good range of motion but no redness. Looks tired with flat affect.
Diagnostic imaging	X-ray of hands showed soft tissue swelling of the metacarpophalangeal and proximal interphalangeal joints. Symmetric joint space narrowing and subtle erosions of the right and left third and fourth metacarpophalangeal joints. Wrists normal.
Laboratory results	WBC 10.1; Hgb 10.6; Platelets 448; Sodium 137; Potassium 4.2; BUN 18; AST 35; Alk Phos 148; total protein 6.3; Calcium 8.9; TSH 2.53; ESR 55. Urinalysis 5-10 RBCs and 1+ protein. Serology: Rheumatoid factor 1:64; Anti-cyclic citrullinated peptides antibodies 1:128; ANA negative; C3 and C4 normal; Lyme IgM/IgG: negative. Synovial fluid: turbid, straw-colored; 40,000 WBC/mm ³ ; 85% neutrophils; gram stain/culture negative; no crystals seen.
Final diagnosis	Early erosive, seropositive rheumatoid arthritis affecting both hands
Plan	Lab/X-ray results, diagnosis and treatment plan discussed. Educational handouts given. Therapy with methotrexate started, plus folic acid. Continue over-the-counter analgesics per label instructions. Return to see me in one month or sooner if symptoms worsen.
ICD-10-CM codes	M05.741 Rheumatoid arthritis with rheumatoid factor of right hand without organ or systems involvement M05.742 Rheumatoid arthritis with rheumatoid factor of left hand without organ or systems involvement

References: American College of Rheumatology; American Hospital Association Coding Clinic; Arthritis Foundation; ICD-10-CM Official Guidelines for Coding and Reporting; Mayo Clinic; National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine; National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases; WebMD