


Rheumatoid arthritis

Rheumatoid arthritis—sometimes called RA—is a disease that causes pain, swelling, stiffness and loss of function in the joints. It can affect any joint in the body, but it's most common in the wrist and finger joints.¹

What is rheumatoid arthritis?

RA is an autoimmune disease; this means it occurs when the body's immune system, which helps protect the body from infection and disease, mistakenly attacks the lining of the joints.¹ Here's a look at what happens in rheumatoid arthritis:

Scientists aren't sure exactly what causes the immune system to attack the body's tissues, but it may be a combination of genetic and environmental factors. The disease often begins in middle age and is more common in older adults, and women are more likely to develop it than men.²

- 
- White blood cells in the immune system travel to the synovium (tissue that surrounds the joint), causing inflammation.
 - The normally thin synovium becomes thick, making the joint swollen, red and painful.
 - As RA worsens, the synovium invades and destroys the cartilage and bone within the joint.
 - The supportive muscles, ligaments and tendons around the joint become weak and don't work well, leading to pain and joint damage.

What are the symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis?

The symptoms of RA vary from person to person, but common symptoms include:³

- Tender, warm, swollen joints
- Fatigue or low energy
- Symmetrical joint inflammation
- Occasional fevers

Some people have periods of worsening symptoms, called flares, and periods in which they feel better, called remissions. Other people have severe symptoms most of the time for many years, leading to serious joint damage.

Take control of rheumatoid arthritis

Fortunately, there are treatments that allow many people with RA to lead active lives. But joint damage can happen soon after rheumatoid arthritis begins, so early diagnosis and treatment are important. Your healthcare provider can work with you to help relieve pain, reduce inflammation, slow or stop joint damage, and improve your ability to do everyday activities.²

Your healthcare provider may suggest a medicine to help treat RA. Some medicines may help keep the disease from getting worse, and others may help ease symptoms.²

- **Disease-modifying anti-rheumatic drugs (DMARDs)** may help slow the course of the disease. Traditional DMARDs include methotrexate, hydroxychloroquine, sulfasalazine, cyclophosphamide and azathioprine.
- **Biologics** are a subset of DMARDs that may work more quickly than traditional DMARDs. They are injected or given by infusion at a doctor's office.
- **Analgesics** (like acetaminophen) and **nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs** (like ibuprofen and naproxen) may help with pain and swelling, but they don't keep RA from worsening.
- **Corticosteroids** (like prednisone) are potent drugs used short-term to quickly help get potentially damaging inflammation under control while waiting for other medicines to work.

Other ways to help fight rheumatoid arthritis

In addition to medicines to control pain and protect your joints, you can take other steps to help live a full life with RA.

- **Get moving.** Exercise is very beneficial for people with RA. Moderate exercise that emphasizes low-impact aerobics, muscle strengthening and flexibility may help reduce pain and make everyday activities easier.² A physical therapist can help design a tailored exercise program. Always consult your healthcare provider before beginning an exercise program.
- **Rest when you need to.** When RA is active and joints are painful and stiff, rest helps reduce inflammation and fatigue.²
- **Keep a positive attitude.** The pain of RA can make everyday life a battle. Staying positive by practicing self-care, getting support and learning how to work through the pain of arthritis can help you feel in control of your life.
- **Eat an anti-inflammatory diet.** Keep track of the foods that fuel inflammation (e.g., processed and fast foods), and opt for antioxidant-rich foods that can help reduce it. This may include fish, fruits, vegetables, olive oil, nuts and seeds, and beans.²
- **Learn about alternative therapies.** Ask your healthcare provider about topical treatments, relaxation techniques, massage, acupuncture and supplements that may help.

Sources

1. National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases
www.niams.nih.gov/health-topics/rheumatoid-arthritis/advanced#tab-overview
2. National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases
www.niams.nih.gov/health-topics/rheumatoid-arthritis/advanced#tab-treatment
3. National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases
www.niams.nih.gov/health-topics/rheumatoid-arthritis/advanced#tab-symptoms

This is for informational purposes only and does not replace treatment or advice from a healthcare professional. If you have questions, please talk with your healthcare provider. Talk to your provider before beginning an exercise program or making any changes to your diet.