

## Rheumatoid Arthritis



Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is a long-term disease that causes inflammation in the joints. It usually affects the hands, wrists, elbows, feet, ankles, knees, or neck. The inflammation causes pain, swelling, and stiffness and can damage and deform the joints, making them more painful and harder to use over time. RA can also make you feel tired or ill.

You may have periods when the disease eases and then times when it gets worse.

Rheumatoid arthritis is not the same as osteoarthritis, which is usually caused by normal wear and tear on the joints. RA is an autoimmune disease. That means the body's own defense system (immune system) attacks the joints, which causes the inflammation and damage.

Health experts do not yet know what triggers autoimmune diseases like RA or how to cure them. But treatment can help you control the disease and ease your symptoms.

### How is it treated?

Medicine and a healthy lifestyle can help you control rheumatoid arthritis throughout your lifetime.

#### Medicine

Medicines for RA, such as disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs (DMARDs), slow the disease, reduce inflammation, and relieve pain. DMARDs can prevent joint damage and disability, especially if you start to take them early in the disease.

Many of the medicines used to treat RA have side effects. DMARDs slow down your immune system, which raises your risk of getting an infection. So it is important to have regular checkups and talk with your doctor about any problems. This will help your doctor find a treatment that works best for you.

#### Exercise and rest

Exercise, balanced with rest, is the best way to fight stiffness, pain, and tiredness. Pay attention to how you feel, and rest when you need to. Work with a physical therapist to learn stretches and exercises. And check with your doctor before you start a new exercise.

- Try biking and walking if you are not limited by knee, ankle, or foot pain. When you do have pain, exercising in water can help take the stress off your joints.
- Move each joint gently through its full range of motion once or twice a day.
- Rest your joints when they are sore or overworked. Short rest breaks may help more than staying in bed.

- Use heat and cold to ease pain. Take warm showers or baths. Use a hot pack or heating pad set on low. Sleep under a warm electric blanket. For cold, use ice or a cold pack for 10 to 20 minutes at a time. Put a thin cloth between the ice and your skin.

### Healthy eating

Combining exercise with healthy eating can help you reach and stay at a healthy weight, which can ease strain on your joints. A healthy, balanced diet also helps you feel good and protects your heart and bones. Talk to your doctor if you have questions about healthy eating.

- Eat a heart-healthy diet, because RA may raise your risk of heart disease.
- Get enough calcium and vitamin D to protect your bones. RA may raise your risk of thinning bones, or osteoporosis.

### Living with rheumatoid arthritis

Over time, rheumatoid arthritis can change what you can do and how you feel. You and your doctor can work together to control pain and help you stay active.

Take an active role in living your life with RA.

- Set up a treatment plan with your doctor, and learn as much as you can about rheumatoid arthritis. This will help you control pain and stay active. Learn skills for managing pain and depression. A cognitive-behavioral therapist can teach you these skills.
- Learn how to protect your joints. Try to limit or avoid activities that cause joint pain or swelling. Use special kitchen tools and other self-help devices. Talk to your doctor about a cane, walker, or splint if using a joint is painful.

- Set daily and monthly self-care goals for yourself. Follow through on them every day. Be prepared for setbacks. Reward yourself for successes.
- Focus as much as possible on what you **can** do. Distract yourself from thoughts of what you can no longer do.
- Stay connected with friends, family, and others. It can boost your physical and mental health. Think about joining a support or exercise group for people who have RA.

### When to call your doctor

**Call your doctor now** or seek medical care right away if:

- You have a fever or rash along with joint pain.
- You have joint pain that is so severe that you cannot use the joint at all.
- You have sudden swelling, redness, or pain in one or more joints, and you do not know why.
- You have back or neck pain along with weakness in your arms or legs.
- You have a loss of bowel or bladder control.

Watch closely for changes in your health, and be sure to contact your doctor if:

- You have joint pain that lasts for more than 6 weeks.
- You have side effects from your arthritis medicines, such as stomach pain, nausea, heartburn, or dark stools that look like tar.

**Do you have any questions or concerns after reading this information?** It's a good idea to write them down and take them to your next doctor visit.