

Rheumatoid Arthritis – A Patient’s Guide

What is rheumatoid arthritis?

Rheumatoid arthritis is a chronic disease that primarily affects the joints. However, it can affect other organs as well.

Rheumatoid arthritis is an autoimmune disease – one of a group of diseases where the body mistakenly attacks healthy cells. When you have rheumatoid arthritis, your body attacks the lining of the joints (also known as the synovia), which causes painful inflammation. Rheumatoid arthritis can also disrupt the production of synovial fluid that keeps the joints lubricated and mobile. Disruption in the synovial fluid can weaken or destroy the connective tissue around the joints, such as cartilage, tendons and ligaments.

Rheumatoid arthritis is distinct from osteoarthritis – or simply “arthritis” – a generative disease in which the cartilage wears with age.

The causes of rheumatoid arthritis are unknown, but there are several factors which might increase your risk.

Who is at risk of rheumatoid arthritis?

Rheumatoid arthritis affects about 1% of the population globally. It can occur at any age, but it's most likely to appear between ages 40-60. Rheumatoid arthritis that occurs after 60 is known as late-onset rheumatoid arthritis. Women are three times more likely to develop rheumatoid arthritis than men, and more likely to develop it at a younger age.

You may be at a higher risk if you:

- Are female
- Smoke
- Are obese
- Have never given birth
- Have a particular genetic makeup
- Are exposed to chemicals or pollutants at work.

Past emotional or physical trauma may also increase your risk of developing the disease since stress triggers an immune response in the body. Stress may also act as a trigger for the disease if you have a particular genetic makeup.

What are the symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis?

There are various early signs and symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis, especially involving joints, such as:

- Pain and tenderness lasting several weeks
- Swelling
- Stiffness
- Loss of range of motion
- Multiple joint involvements
- Stiffness lasting for more than 30 minutes after getting out of bed or resting
- Symptoms occurring symmetrically, i.e. they affect both sides of the body.

However, rheumatoid arthritis can affect other areas of the body and symptoms might include:

- Fatigue and a general lack of energy
- Raised temperature
- Loss of appetite and/or weight
- Dry, itchy eyes and/or eye discharge
- Difficulty sleeping
- Chest pain
- Unsteadiness when walking
- A loss of function and mobility
- A general sense of malaise.

Symptoms vary from person to person and over time. Periods of severe symptoms are known as flares. Periods with mild or no symptoms are known as remission or “quiet” periods.

Treatment for rheumatoid arthritis is most successful when started early.

If you're concerned you may have rheumatoid arthritis, the first step is to see your GP and discuss any symptoms, including those not related to joints. If your GP suspects rheumatoid arthritis, you may need more in-depth tests or a referral for a specialist.

What other complications can arise with rheumatoid arthritis?

The key goals of early intervention are to reduce both the activity of the disease and the rate of progression. Early intervention helps prevent joint damage and may prevent symptoms related to other organs, such as:

- **widespread inflammation** – this may include the lungs, heart, eyes and blood vessels
- **cardiovascular disease** – rheumatoid arthritis sufferers are more prone to developing this condition
- **cervical myelopathy** – a condition that may lead to dislocation of joints at the top of the spine.

How is rheumatoid arthritis diagnosed?

Your GP will examine affected joints and discuss any other symptoms. If they suspect rheumatoid arthritis, they will probably refer you to a rheumatologist – a specialist in diagnosing and treating this disease. Your GP may carry out a range of blood tests first.

Blood tests may include:

- Erythrocyte sedimentation rate (ESR or sed rate), which determines the level of inflammation in the body
- C-reactive protein (CRP), which measures a protein released by the liver which also indicates the amount of inflammation
- Anemia, as this is common in people with rheumatoid arthritis
- Rheumatoid factor, which detects the presence of rheumatoid antibodies which may indicate rheumatoid arthritis is present although not everyone with rheumatoid arthritis tests positive.

They may also do an x-ray or MRI scan, to visually assess any impact the disease may have had on your joint(s).

Your healthcare professional will base the diagnosis on a combination of symptoms, blood tests and x-ray/scan results.

How is rheumatoid arthritis treated?

There is currently no cure for rheumatoid arthritis. Treatment can slow the progression of the disease and, in some cases, may halt it. With a combination of early treatment, lifestyle changes and medication, it's possible for patients to minimize joint damage and the impact on their lives.

The main objectives of treatment are to:

- Minimize pain
- Stop or reduce inflammation as far as possible
- Improve function and overall well being
- Prevent joint and organ damage.

Treatment may include prescribed medications such as:

- NSAIDs (non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs) or steroids to reduce pain and inflammation particularly during flaring periods
- DMARDs (disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs) to block the immune system response and slow progression of the disease
- Biologics (another type of DMARD) to target inflammation rather than the immune system as a whole
- JAK inhibitors (the newest type of DMARD) to target specific immune responses, prevent inflammation and therefore damage to joints, especially where other treatment options aren't effective.

Some of these treatments target the immune system and can have significant side effects. They may not be suitable or effective for everyone. Discuss any medications with your GP.

Therapies such as physiotherapy, osteopathy, occupational therapy and massage may also help provide symptom relief.

Several home remedies can also help:

- **Exercise** – to help mobility in the joints
- **Rest** – to help reduce inflammation
- **Ice or cold compressors** – to help reduce inflammation
- **Shower or hot compresses** – to alleviate stiffness
- **Assistive devices** – to help rest joints or maintain mobility.

Living with rheumatoid arthritis

Although maintaining good general health is essential with any condition, it is vital for rheumatoid arthritis because the disease generally leads to a compromised immune system.

Healthcare professionals may encourage you to consider some lifestyle changes and discuss effective ways you can assist your treatment, such as:

- Maintaining a healthy diet
- Maintaining a healthy weight
- Avoiding cigarette smoke or other pollutants
- Maintaining exercise and a general state of wellness
- Monitoring how the disease affects you daily and over the longer term
- Complying with prescribed treatments
- Regular checkups and reviews with your healthcare professional.

Getting help elsewhere

The impact of rheumatoid arthritis on a person's life can be significant. It might affect your emotional state, self-esteem, relationships, family planning, employment and financial circumstances. Patients are encouraged to seek advice or counselling from the relevant qualified professionals.

With a combination of early intervention, the right medications and therapies, and simple lifestyle adjustments, it's possible to significantly reduce the impact of rheumatoid arthritis, in both the short and long terms.

Where to go for help

As with all matters relating to your health, your healthcare professional can give you the best advice.

However, there are several resources for information and support in the UK.

- NHS Rheumatoid Arthritis Information and Services
<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/rheumatoid-arthritis/>
A detailed information resource with links to further support.
- National Rheumatoid Arthritis Society
<https://www.nras.org.uk/>
The leading society for rheumatoid arthritis in the UK, providing a range of support and services to people suffering from the disease, and healthcare professionals. The website is an exhaustive information resource on most aspects of living with and managing the disease, plus links to further information.
- National Rheumatoid Arthritis Society Helpline
+44 (0)800 298 7650
helpline@nras.org.uk
A helpline to contact trained staff who can provide support during difficult times, or direct you to further support.
- Speak to another rheumatoid arthritis patient
<https://www.nras.org.uk/speak-to-someone-else-with-ra>
Call +44 (0)800 298 7650 to request a call back from suitable fellow rheumatoid arthritis sufferer.