



# Rheumatoid Arthritis

## Guide to Good Health

### *Healthy Living Guide*

- ▶ Asthma
- ▶ Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS)
- ▶ Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD)
- ▶ Coronary Artery Disease (CAD)
- ▶ Depression
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- ▶ Osteoarthritis (OA)
- ▶ Osteoporosis
- ▶ Type 2 Diabetes
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- ▶ Healthy Eating
- ▶ Healthy Pregnancy
- ▶ Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA)
- ▶ Sleep
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- ▶ Stress Management
- ▶ Weight Management
- ▶ Bariatric Surgery

## What is Rheumatoid Arthritis?

Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA) is a chronic autoimmune disease in which the body's immune system attacks primarily the lining of the joints (synovial membrane), but can also affect other organs, causing inflammation. This inflammation can result in the erosion of cartilage, bone and sometimes joint deformation.

### Overview & Facts

- RA affects an estimated 1.3 Americans of any age but usually begins between the ages of 40 and 60.
- RA affects both women and men while two to three times more common in women.
- The inflammation can be found in any joint, but it most commonly occurs in the small joints of the hands.
- RA may also affect the skin, eyes, lungs, heart, blood vessels and nerves.
- Individuals with RA may be affected differently from other with the same disease. Some may display symptoms for a period of time and then the disease goes into remission. While others have symptoms for years or even the rest of their life.

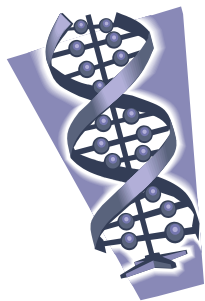


### Signs & Symptoms

- ✓ Warmth, pain, swelling, stiffness and decreased mobility of the affected joints.
- ✓ Stiffness of the joints is typically worse in the morning and after prolonged periods of inactivity that can take over an hour to loosen.
- ✓ RA typically presents with symmetrical joint involvement. This means if one joint is affected typically the same joint on the other side of the body is affected as well.
- ✓ Many may also feel fatigue, muscle aches, loss of appetite and fevers.
- ✓ Some individuals may develop hard lumps under the skin and in organs (rheumatoid nodules).

### Causes

While the cause of RA is unknown, researchers are evaluating genetic, hormonal and environmental factors that may influence the development of this disease.



### Risk Factors

- Symptoms typically begin between that ages of 40-60 but can affect people of all ages.
- The occurrence in women compared to men is 2 to 3 times more frequent.
- Researchers are studying the possible genetic link resulting in an increased risk of RA when a family history of this disease is present.
- Researchers also explore a possible environmental connection with bacteria and viruses.
- Cigarette smoking may be a risk factor in not only the occurrence of RA but also the severity.



### Questions to Ask Your Provider

1. How should I take my meds daily and how should I take them during a flare?
2. Are there other options to help ease the pain such as hot and cold packs?
3. What exercise program and intensity level is appropriate for RA?
4. What would be a healthy weight?
5. Are there any nutritional supplements that might be appropriate?



## Diagnostic Workup

- While an emphasis has been put on early diagnosis of RA to start rapid treatment to improve prognosis, it may be difficult to diagnose in the beginning stages. It will take a variety of tests including physical, laboratory and radiographic examinations to uniquely and at a different level of severity determine diagnosis. The symptoms present from one person to the next. Symptoms may also mimic other kinds of arthritis or joint conditions.
- In the physical exam, the physician will assess for signs or symptoms of RA. This will determine need for additional tests.
- In laboratory tests the physician may run C-reactive protein and erythrocyte sedimentation rate (sed rate) to determine inflammation. They may check for rheumatoid factor and anti-CCP antibodies which are present in the majority of individuals with RA. The physician may also check for anemia which is commonly found in people with RA.
- X-rays may be done to identify joint abnormalities such as soft tissue swelling or joint damage. The x-ray may also be used to follow disease progression. An MRI may be done to identify inflammation in the joint and other organs that may not be evident in the x-ray.



## Treatment and Care

### 1. Medical

- The goal in medical therapy is to decrease pain, inflammation and joint damage.
- Hot packs or warm showers may be used to relieve painful joints and muscles.
- A splint may be used to ease the pain of effected joints during a flare.
- Some individuals may choose to have joint replacement or arthroscopic surgery if the pain becomes intolerable or if the damage to the joint becomes significant.



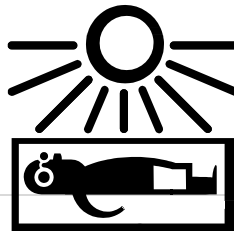
### 2. Pharmacological

- Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatories (NSAID) may be used to decrease pain and inflammation, but because they do not stop the progression of the disease may be used in combination with other medications.
- Steroids are used to help quickly improve symptoms of pain and inflammation in severe cases or during temporary flares.
- Disease-modifying anti-rheumatic drugs (DMARDs) suppress the immune system to stop or slow the progression of the disease.
- Biologics are the newest medications that are prescribed for RA often when the other medications are not effective. This genetically engineered protein is designed to suppress the part of the immune system that affects inflammation.



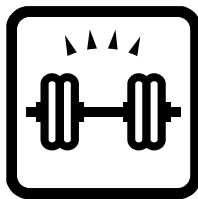
### 3. Emotional/Psychological

- Individuals diagnosed with RA may experience depression, anxiety, stress, feeling of helplessness, isolation or low self esteem. It is important to speak with your health care provider concerning any of these feelings.
- The emotional and physical challenges may increase a person's stress level. It is important to practice stress management, relaxation techniques and get plenty of rest.
- Establish a good support system with family, friends, coworkers, support group, local congregations or volunteer organizations. Inform the people around you when you may need additional assistance.



#### 4. Physical

- Regular exercise is vital in the treatment of RA to reduce joint pain and stiffness, keep bones and muscles strong, maintain flexibility and improve mental well being. Exercise programs will generally include low-impact aerobic, resistance training and stretching. It may require developing a balance between remaining physically active and resting during times of flares. It is important to speak with your physician concerning the types of exercise and the level of intensity that is appropriate.
- There are specially designed devices to make flare. There are devices that aid with standing, reaching, etc.



daily physical activity easier during times of bathing, dressing, grooming, gripping, folding,

#### 5. Nutritional

- Nutritional intake should be balanced while promoting a healthy weight. Excess weight or weight gain may add additional stress on the weight bearing joints.
- Individuals with RA, especially those on a corticosteroid, should speak with their physician regarding whether calcium and vitamin D supplementation is appropriate to prevent osteoporosis.
- Special attention may be placed on food preparation and kitchen layout to make cooking easier. You may consider cooking in bulk and storing leftovers in the freezer to prevent cooking when RA is flaring. Keep a high stool in the kitchen to prevent you from standing for long periods. Specialized cooking equipment is available with easy grips and padded handles.

#### *Resources*

- ❖ Center for Disease Control and Prevention: [www.cdc.gov/arthritis/basics/rheumatoid.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/arthritis/basics/rheumatoid.htm)
- ❖ American College of Rheumatology: [www.rheumatology.org](http://www.rheumatology.org)
- ❖ Arthritis Foundation: [www.arthritis.org](http://www.arthritis.org)
- ❖ WebMD: [www.webmd.com](http://www.webmd.com)
- ❖ National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Disease: [www.niams.nih.gov](http://www.niams.nih.gov)