

# Rheumatoid Arthritis

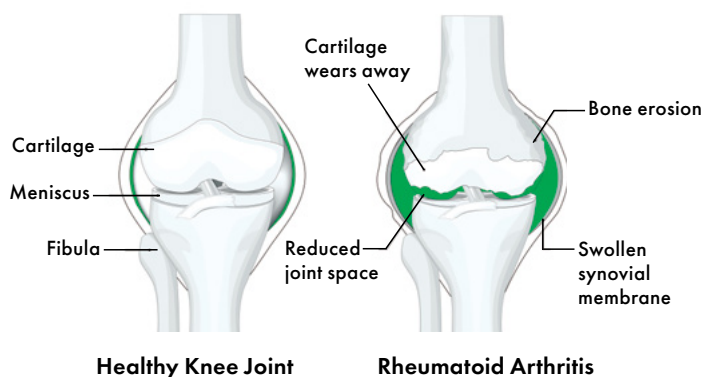
## About Rheumatoid Arthritis

In rheumatoid arthritis (RA), the immune system becomes overactive, causing inflammation that results in joint swelling and pain. If inflammation continues for a long time, it can cause permanent damage to joints. It can also affect the heart, eyes, lungs and other organs. There is no cure for RA, but many people with RA go into remission (low or no disease activity) and live full and active lives.

### Signs and Symptoms of Rheumatoid Arthritis

In the early stages, people with RA may not see redness or swelling in the joints, but they may feel tenderness and pain. These joint symptoms are clues to RA:

- Joint pain, tenderness, swelling or stiffness for six weeks or longer
- Morning stiffness for 30 minutes or longer
- More than one joint with pain, stiffness or other symptoms
- Joints of the hands, knees and feet are commonly affected
- The same joints on both sides of the body (like both wrists) have symptoms.



Some people also have fatigue, loss of appetite and a low-grade fever. RA symptoms may come and go. A period of high disease activity, with more inflammation and other symptoms, is called a flare. A flare can last for days or months.

### Diagnosing Rheumatoid Arthritis

There is no single test used to diagnose RA. If your primary care physician suspects that you have RA, they may refer you to a rheumatologist, a doctor who treats diseases of the joints, muscles and bones.

## ➔ FAST FACTS

- About 1.5 million people in the U.S. have rheumatoid arthritis (RA).
- Nearly three times as many women as men have the disease.
- In women, RA usually begins between ages 30 and 60. In men, it often occurs later in life.
- Having a family member with RA increases the odds of developing it. However, many people with RA have no family history of the disease.

## For More Information

Rheumatoid Arthritis Information & Resources:

[arthritis.org/about-rheumatoid-arthritis](https://arthritis.org/about-rheumatoid-arthritis)

Arthritis Foundation Helpline:  
800-283-7800

[arthritis.org/helpline](https://arthritis.org/helpline)

The rheumatologist will:

- Ask about your and your family's medical history
- Perform a physical exam
- Order X-rays, ultrasound scans or MRIs to look at your joints
- Order blood tests to look for proteins and cells that cause inflammation.

## Treating Rheumatoid Arthritis

The goals of rheumatoid arthritis treatment are to:

- Slow or stop inflammation and reach remission
- Ease symptoms, including pain and fatigue
- Prevent joint and organ damage and reduce long-term complications
- Improve physical function and overall well-being.

Early treatment is key to reducing damage from RA. Various types of medicines help manage pain and other RA symptoms and slow or stop disease activity. These include analgesics (like *Tylenol*), over-the-counter and prescription nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (called "NSAIDs," including ibuprofen or naproxen), fast-acting corticosteroids that reduce inflammation and prescription disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs (DMARDs). Some DMARDs, like methotrexate, are available as pills, while others, like biologic medications, are taken by injection or infusion. Your rheumatologist may prescribe more than one drug and adjust them to help you reach remission.

In addition to medications, therapies like acupuncture or acupressure, massage, relaxation and meditation techniques may help control your RA symptoms. Heat and cold, some creams and gels, and certain dietary supplements may also help.

To keep your joints flexible and strong so you can move well, consider working with physical therapists, occupational therapists to keep you strong and flexible and come up with ways to make everyday tasks and exercise easier. A registered dietitian can help you eat well to manage RA and give you healthy nutrition tips.

## Self-Management Is Key

Self-management means trying to take an active role in your own care.

These activities include:

- Keeping track of your symptoms
- Staying close to family and friends who support you
- Staying active and practicing mindfulness to lower stress
- Eating healthfully and limiting sugar, alcohol and processed foods
- Getting at least 30 minutes of physical activity at least five days a week
- Pacing your activities
- Using complementary therapies (like massage and relaxation)
- Staying a healthy weight
- Not smoking or vaping.

## FAQs

### Is there an "arthritis diet" that can help treat my RA?

There is no diet for RA, but researchers have identified certain foods that might help control inflammation. Try following a "Mediterranean diet," which emphasizes fish, fruits, vegetables, whole grains and healthy fats like olive oil, avocados and nuts. Inflammatory foods to avoid include simple carbohydrates, sugar and fats, processed foods and red meats.

### Does RA affect my chances of having children?

Having RA doesn't make you more likely to have reproductive issues. But certain RA medications may interfere with a healthy pregnancy. That's why you must use birth control when taking those medications. Talk to your rheumatologist about family planning to develop a treatment plan that's right for you.

### Will my RA ever go away?

While there is no cure for rheumatoid arthritis, some people reach remission. Talk with your rheumatologist to develop a treatment plan that will work toward that goal.