

## About Rheumatoid Arthritis

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is an autoimmune disease in which the body's immune system mistakenly attacks healthy cells, including the joints. Your immune system is supposed to protect you from foreign invaders, such as bacteria and viruses. In people with RA, an overactive immune system causes inflammation that results in swelling and pain in and around the joints. If inflammation continues for a long time, it can damage cartilage (the protective tissue that covers the ends of joints) and bones. This damage usually can't be reversed once it happens. RA inflammation also can affect organs, such as the heart, eyes and lungs. Currently, there is no cure for RA, but Arthritis Foundation researchers and others are working towards one.

## Signs and Symptoms of Rheumatoid Arthritis

In the early stages, people with RA may not initially see redness or swelling in the joints, but they may experience 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 is affected
- Joints of the hands, knees and feet are commonly affected
- The same joints on both sides of the body are affected

Along with pain, some people experience fatigue, loss of appetite and a low-grade fever. The symptoms and effects of RA may come and go.

A period of high disease activity (an increase in inflammation and other symptoms) is called a flare. A flare can last for days or months.

## FAST FACTS

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

## Diagnosing Rheumatoid Arthritis

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

The rheumatologist will:

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



**More About  
Rheumatoid Arthritis**

**Tools and Resources**  
[arthritis.org/resources](https://arthritis.org/resources)

**Arthritis Foundation Help Line**  
**1-800-283-7800 (toll-free)**

## Treating Rheumatoid Arthritis

The goals of rheumatoid arthritis treatment are to:

- Reduce or stop inflammation and achieve remission
  - Relieve symptoms
  - Prevent joint and organ damage and reduce long-term complications
  - Improve physical function and overall well-being
- Early, aggressive treatment is key to minimizing the

damaging effects of RA. Medicines used to manage RA have two functions: provide pain relief and slow/stop disease progression. They include analgesics, anti-inflammatory medicine, corticosteroids and disease-modifying drugs, which include biologic medicines. These drugs are available in pill or topical form as well as injections. Your rheumatologist may prescribe more than one drug at a time to treat your various symptoms and may combine over-the-counter and prescription options.

In addition to medications, you can seek out non-medicine methods, or complementary therapies, for managing your RA symptoms. These may include acupuncture or acupressure, massage, relaxation and meditation techniques. Hot and cold therapy, topical treatments and dietary supplements may also be helpful.

## SELF-MANAGEMENT IS KEY

**Self-management means taking a proactive role in your care. These self-care activities include:**

- **Monitoring your symptoms and closely following your medication regimen**
- **Caring for emotional health**
- **Eating healthy, anti-inflammatory foods**
- **Getting at least 30 minutes of physical activity each day**
- **Balancing rest and activity (activity pacing)**
- **Utilizing complementary therapies (e.g., massage)**
- **Maintaining a healthy weight**

## FAQ

**Is there an “arthritis diet” that can help treat my RA?** While there is no specific “diet” that people with RA should follow, researchers have identified certain foods that can help control inflammation. Many of them are found in the so-called Mediterranean diet, which emphasizes fish, fruits, vegetables, whole grains and healthy fats like olive oil, avocados and nuts.

**Does RA affect my chances of having children?** Having RA does not make a person more likely to have reproductive issues than anyone else. However, certain medications

taken for RA may interfere with a healthy pregnancy. That’s why doctors often require patients to use birth control when taking those medications. Talk to your rheumatologist about family planning, and together you can develop a treatment plan that’s right for you.

**Will my RA ever go away?** While there is no cure for rheumatoid arthritis, for some people achieving remission (absence of disease activity) is possible both on and off RA medications. Together with your rheumatologist, you can develop a treatment plan that will work toward that goal.