

# Rheumatoid arthritis

**Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is an immune system disorder which causes swelling, pain and stiffness in joints. It can damage joints and may also affect other body organs. Treatment includes medicines, joint care and lifestyle changes. If started early, treatment can prevent or limit joint damage.**

RA is an auto-immune disease. In an auto-immune disease, a person's own immune system damages their body. In rheumatoid arthritis the tissue that lines joints (synovial membrane) is damaged. RA may also affect other body tissues including tear glands, saliva glands, skin, muscles, bones, blood vessels, lungs and the heart. The cause of RA is not known.

## Signs and symptoms

RA most commonly affects joints in the hands, knees and feet. It usually affects the same joints on both sides of the body at the same time.

Symptoms vary from person to person and include:

- warm, red, swollen, painful joints
- joint stiffness (especially first thing in the morning)



*Chronic rheumatoid arthritis showing classic features of deformities including subluxation of joints and rheumatoid nodules. From page 345, Murtagh's General Practice, 4th Ed. McGraw-Hill Australia Pty Ltd.*

- loss of joint motion
- muscle weakness
- constant tiredness
- rheumatoid nodules – small painless lumps under the skin.

Symptoms can vary from mild to severe, can move from joint to joint, and can flare-up and settle down. RA can cause

permanent joint damage, and joints may lose their shape and function.

## Blood tests

Blood tests can help to diagnose RA and monitor treatment. These tests measure:

- signs of inflammation in the body, such as *C-reactive protein* (CRP) and *Erythrocyte Sedimentation Rate* (ESR)
- antibodies connected with RA such as *Rheumatoid factor* (RF) and *Anti-CCP*.

## Management

Management plans for RA aim to stop or slow down disease activity, prevent or limit joint damage, and keep the person's quality of life.

Management includes medicines to relieve symptoms and medicines to reduce disease activity. It also includes non-medicine ways to reduce pain, protect and support joints, and manage the tasks of daily living. Doctors, pharmacists, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, podiatrists and dietitians can help.

## Medicines

Several different types of medicines are used to treat RA. Ask a doctor or pharmacist for information and advice.

**Pain relievers** – paracetamol can relieve pain without causing serious side effects. For best relief of RA pain, paracetamol usually needs to be taken *regularly three or four times a day*. Sometimes stronger opioid pain relievers are needed (e.g. codeine, oxycodone, tramadol).

## Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAID)

(e.g. aspirin, diclofenac, ibuprofen, naproxen, meloxicam, celecoxib) – NSAIDs can reduce joint pain, swelling and stiffness. Some can be bought without a doctor's prescription. NSAIDs must be used with care as they can cause serious side effects.

**Fish Oil** – the omega-3 fatty acids found in fish oil can reduce joint inflammation. They can reduce the joint pain and stiffness caused by RA. Fish oil is available as capsules and liquid. Fish oil may need to be taken regularly for two to three months before symptoms improve.

**Disease-modifying anti-rheumatic drugs (DMARDS)** (e.g. methotrexate, hydroxychloroquine, sulfasalazine, leflunomide, cyclosporin) – DMARDS can reduce disease activity. Early treatment with a DMARD can prevent or limit damage to joints and other body organs. They may take a few months to relieve symptoms, and must be closely monitored to avoid serious side effects.

**Biological DMARDS** (e.g. certolizumab, etanercept, golimumab, adalimumab, abatacept) – b-DMARDS can reduce disease activity. They are given by injection and may relieve symptoms within a few weeks. They must be closely monitored to avoid serious side effects.

**Corticosteroids** (e.g. prednisolone, prednisone) – corticosteroids (steroids) reduce inflammation in the body. They can quickly relieve symptoms of RA. They may be taken as tablets or injected into joints. Steroids cause serious side effects, so are usually only used for a short time to control severe symptoms.

## Self care

Learn about RA and the ways to manage it. Join a support group.

### Pain relief

- Take medicines regularly, according to directions.
- Heat therapy (e.g. hot packs, a warm bath) can relieve pain and stiffness.
- Cold therapy (e.g. cold packs) can relieve hot and swollen joints.

Ask a doctor or physiotherapist about how and when to use heat and cold therapy.

### Rest and joint care

Have good posture to limit stress on joints and muscles. Learn to recognise when your body and joints need to rest, and learn ways to protect joints during daily activities. Walking aids and splints can help protect joints. An occupational therapist or 'Independent Living Centres

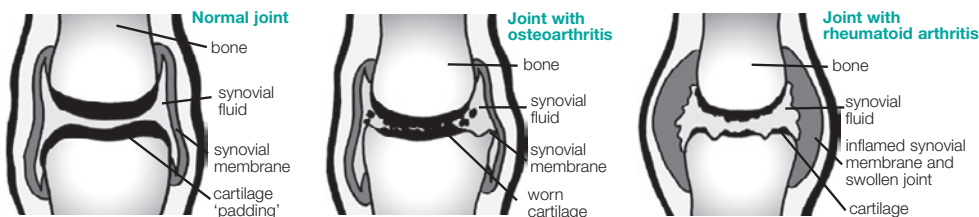
Australia' can advise on splints and mechanical aids to help with daily tasks (e.g. hand rails, tap turners, reaching aids).

### Exercise

Exercise regularly to improve mood, decrease pain, increase flexibility, strengthen muscles, bones and ligaments, and to keep your heart healthy. Warm water exercise may help as the warmth and buoyancy of the water makes movement easier. Ask a doctor, physiotherapist, occupational therapist or 'Arthritis Australia' about suitable exercises.

### Healthy lifestyle

- Eat regular, healthy meals, including plenty of fruits, vegetables and wholegrain foods. Limit foods high in fat, sugar or salt. A dietician can advise on foods containing omega-3 fatty acids that may help reduce joint inflammation.
- Keep to a healthy weight to limit stress on joints.
- Don't smoke – smokers are more likely to get RA, and smoking can worsen RA.



## For more information

### **Arthritis Australia**

Phone: 1800 011 041

Website: [www.arthritisaustralia.com.au](http://www.arthritisaustralia.com.au)

### **Australian Rheumatology Association**

Website: [www.rheumatology.org.au](http://www.rheumatology.org.au)

### **Independent Living Centres Australia**

Phone: 1300 885 886

Website: [www.ilcaustralia.org.au](http://www.ilcaustralia.org.au)

### **Healthdirect Australia**

Phone: 1800 022 222

Website: [www.healthdirect.org.au](http://www.healthdirect.org.au)

### **Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)**

Your pharmacist can advise on CMI leaflets.

### **NPS Medicine Wise**

#### **Medicines Information Line**

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)

Website: [www.nps.org.au](http://www.nps.org.au)

### **The Poisons Information Centre**

In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26 from anywhere in Australia.

***Pharmacists are medicines experts.  
Ask a pharmacist for advice when  
choosing a medicine.***

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Your Self Care Pharmacy: