

Rheumatoid arthritis

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is an immune system disorder which causes swelling, pain and stiffness in joints. It can lead to joint deformity 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.

In rheumatoid arthritis the tissue that lines joints (synovial membrane) is attacked by the body's own immune system. RA may also affect other body tissues including tear glands, salivary 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 and 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
- Persistent tiredness
- Rheumatoid nodules – small painless lumps under the skin.

Symptoms may vary from mild to severe, may move from joint to joint and may flare-up and subside. Over time

damaged joints may lose their shape, alignment and function.

Blood tests

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

- Indicators of tissue inflammation such as *C-reactive protein* (CRP) and *Erythrocyte Sedimentation Rate* (ESR)
- Antibodies associated with RA such as *Rheumatoid factor* (RF) and *Anti-CCP*.

Management

Management programs for RA aim to stop disease activity, prevent or limit joint damage and preserve quality of life.

They include medicines to relieve symptoms, medicines that can reduce disease activity and non-medicine strategies to reduce pain, preserve joint function and manage the tasks of daily living. Doctors, pharmacists, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, podiatrists and dietitians can help.

Medicines

- **Pain relievers** – paracetamol may relieve pain without causing serious side effects. For best pain relief, paracetamol needs to be taken *regularly three or four times a day*. Sometimes stronger pain relievers are needed (e.g. codeine, oxycodone, tramadol).
- **Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAID)** (e.g. aspirin, diclofenac, ibuprofen,

naproxen) – reduce joint pain, swelling and stiffness. Some can be purchased without a doctor's prescription.

They must be used with care to avoid serious gastrointestinal, heart and kidney problems.

- **Cox-2 inhibitor NSAIDs** (e.g. celecoxib, meloxicam) – types of NSAIDs that may cause less gastrointestinal problems. They must be prescribed by a doctor.
- **Fish Oils** – the omega-3 fatty acids found in fish oils have anti-inflammatory effects and can reduce the joint pain and stiffness of RA and reduce the need for NSAIDs. The dose of omega-3 fatty acids recommended for RA may be taken as fish oil capsules or liquid and may need to be taken regularly for two to three months before symptoms improve. Ask a doctor or pharmacist for advice.
- **DMARDS** (disease-modifying anti-rheumatic drugs) (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 organs. They may take weeks to months to act and must be closely monitored to avoid serious side effects.
- **Biological DMARDS** (e.g. etanercept, infliximab, adalimumab, anakinra) – bDMARDS can reduce disease activity.

They are given by injection and may dramatically relieve symptoms within a few weeks. They must be closely monitored to avoid serious side effects.

- **Corticosteroids** (e.g. prednisolone, prednisone) – reduce inflammation and can quickly and dramatically relieve symptoms. They may be taken as tablets or injected into joints. Steroids cause serious side effects, so are usually only used for short periods to control severe inflammation.

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

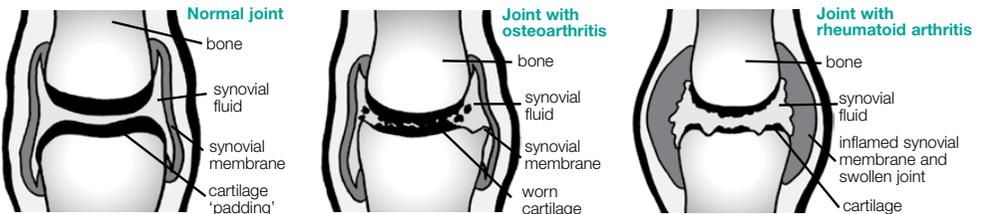
when your body and joints need to rest and learn ways to protect joints during daily activities. Walking aids and splints can help protect joints. An occupational therapist or 'Independent Living Centres Australia' can advise on splints and mechanical aids to help with daily tasks (e.g. hand rails, tap turners, reaching aids).

Exercise

Exercise regularly to improve mood, decrease pain, increase flexibility, and strengthen muscles, bones and ligaments. Warm water exercise may be helpful as the warmth and buoyancy of the water makes movement easier. A doctor, physiotherapist, occupational therapist or 'Arthritis Australia' can advise on appropriate exercises.

Healthy lifestyle

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



For more information

MedicAlert

Phone: 1800 88 22 22
www.medicalert.org.au

Arthritis Australia

Phone: 1800 011 041 or 1800 678 988
Website: www.arthritisaustralia.com.au

Australian Rheumatology Association

Website: www.rheumatology.org.au

Independent Living Centres Australia

Phone: 1300 885 886
Website: www.ilcaustralia.org

Healthdirect Australia

Phone: 1800 022 222
Website: www.healthinsite.gov.au

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)

Your pharmacist can advise on CMI leaflets.

National Prescribing Service (NPS) Medicines Information

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)
Website: 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: