Live Better With Rheumatoid Arthritis
Getting Started

This guide will help you understand:

**Chapter 1:** Rheumatoid arthritis

**Chapter 2:** Your medicines

**Chapter 3:** Vitamins, yoga, and other treatments

**Chapter 4:** Eating for health

**Chapter 5:** How to make everyday activities easier

**Chapter 6:** Your feelings

This guide was developed by doctors, nurses, pharmacists, and patients, many of whom are in these pictures.
When you have rheumatoid arthritis, it is important to take care of yourself.

By learning to take good care of yourself, you will:

- Have less pain, stiffness, and swelling in your joints
- Have more energy
- Be able to do more things you like to do

“When I first got rheumatoid arthritis, I had too much pain to get out of bed. The medicines made a difference.”

“My doctor explained what to expect.”
Facts About Rheumatoid Arthritis

People with rheumatoid arthritis have joints that are painful, stiff, and swollen. Usually these problems start in the hands and feet, but they can move to the elbows, knees, shoulders, and other places.

Having rheumatoid arthritis may also make you:

- Feel tired
- Lose or gain weight
- Have trouble sleeping
- Feel sad, irritable, or upset

Over time, people with rheumatoid arthritis may get other health problems, like heart disease, stroke, or weak bones (osteoporosis).

No one knows exactly how you get rheumatoid arthritis. Anyone can get it. You can’t cure it, but you can treat it so you feel better.
Medicines can:

- Help you feel better and stay active
- Protect your joints from permanent damage
- Help prevent heart attacks and strokes

Start taking medicines for rheumatoid arthritis as soon as they are prescribed. The earlier you start treatment:

- The easier it will be to do your normal activities
- The less likely you are to get permanent joint damage

Most people with rheumatoid arthritis need to take two, three, or even more medicines.
There are three main kinds of medicines to help joint pain, swelling, and stiffness from rheumatoid arthritis.

Ask your health care provider to write down which ones you take:

**Special rheumatoid arthritis medicines** which slow or stop the damage to your joints. Experts call these DMARDs (disease-modifying anti-rheumatic drugs):

________________________________________________________________________

**Steroids** (like prednisone):

________________________________________________________________________

**Anti-inflammatory medicines** (like ibuprofen or naproxen):

________________________________________________________________________

**Attention**

Before you start rheumatoid arthritis medicines, ask your health care provider whether you need a:

- TB test
- Pneumonia shot
- Yearly flu shot
- Blood test for hepatitis
- Shingles shot
These medicines (also called DMARDs) are the most important medicines for your rheumatoid arthritis because they:

- Are the only ones that protect your joints from getting worse
- Allow you to take a lower dose of steroids

There are many types of these medicines. One is methotrexate. Methotrexate is taken only once a week. You must also take a vitamin called folic acid with methotrexate. Take folic acid every day.

If your joints stay swollen, your health care provider may add another medicine or switch to a new one. You may have to try different rheumatoid arthritis medicines before you find the right one.

It is important to take these medicines exactly as prescribed. Keep taking them even when you are feeling better.
Side Effects

Special rheumatoid arthritis medicines may make it more likely that you will get an infection. Most infections are mild, like a cold. But some infections (like skin, joint, lung, or blood infections) can be severe. It is important to let your health care provider know every time you get a fever.

It is not clear whether some of these medicines also increase your risk for certain types of cancer.

Talk to your health care provider about your side effects so that she can find a safe medicine for you.

Always talk to your health care provider before you stop taking any of your medicines.
Women with rheumatoid arthritis can still have healthy babies. However, taking some rheumatoid arthritis medicines during pregnancy can cause birth defects.

If you want to get pregnant in the next 6 months, you may have to stop some of your rheumatoid arthritis medicines. Talk with your health care provider to come up with a plan. If you do not want to get pregnant, you must use birth control every time. Condoms are not enough—many people using condoms get pregnant. Some rheumatoid arthritis medicines affect sperm too.

Ask about birth control pills or patches, an IUD, hormone shots, or surgery (for women or men).

Important

Some rheumatoid arthritis medicines cause birth defects.

Tell your health care provider:
• If you ever have sex without birth control (whether you are a man or a woman)
• If you are pregnant, thinking about getting pregnant, or nursing a baby

Your health care provider can help you find the best birth control and the safest rheumatoid arthritis medicines.
Steroids (like prednisone) help joints get better quickly while you wait for your other rheumatoid arthritis medicines to start working.

Steroids have side effects like:

- Mood changes or trouble sleeping
- Weight gain, diabetes, and high blood pressure
- Swelling, especially your face
- Bruises
- Thin skin
- Trouble fighting infection
- Weak bones (osteoporosis)
- Eye problems (cataracts)

Do not stop taking steroids suddenly. Your health care provider will give you instructions for how to stop them slowly.

“"I hated how the steroids made my face swell up, but I knew I wouldn’t be on them forever.”"
Anti-Inflammatory Medicines

Anti-inflammatory medicines (like ibuprofen or naproxen) help the swelling, pain, and stiffness in your joints. They don’t keep rheumatoid arthritis from getting worse.

You can get anti-inflammatory medicines with or without a prescription.

Make sure you know how much of your anti-inflammatory medicines you can take every day. If your rheumatoid arthritis is well controlled, you may not need to take these medicines very often.

Anti-inflammatory medicines can cause upset stomach (including stomach ulcers) and kidney damage.

“I only need my naproxen every once in a while because my joints don’t hurt all the time.”
Your pharmacist can be a big help in managing your medicines. Talk to your pharmacist if you have:

- Trouble opening medicine bottles
- Trouble paying for medicines
- Questions about medicines or their side effects
- Questions about whether it is safe to take nonprescription medicines

Ask for refills a few weeks before your medicines run out. Many pharmacies do not carry certain rheumatoid arthritis medicines, and sometimes your insurance company needs time to approve them.

If you are traveling and forget your medicines, call your pharmacist.

“My pharmacist helps me keep track of all my medicines and makes sure they don’t react with each other.”
“Take your medicines at the same time every day. Once you start a routine, then it gets locked into your brain... Methotrexate Mondays.”

“I keep all my medicines in a little bag. It makes it easy to take them to each doctor’s visit.”

“Find a doctor that really listens. Together you can find medicines that work for you.”

“I had trouble affording my medicines. The nurse helped me enroll in a program.”
Dos and Don’ts of Rheumatoid Arthritis Medicines

**Do**

*bring all your medicines and their bottles to every visit with your health care provider. Remember your over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, herbal medicines you only take sometimes, and medicines from other health care providers.*

**Do**

*talk with your health care provider about side effects.*

**Do**

*make sure you always use birth control.*

**Don’t**

*stop taking any medicines without talking to your health care provider first.*
Many people look for other ways to help their rheumatoid arthritis in addition to medicines. As long as they are safe (check with your health care provider), use any of these that make you feel better:

- Vitamins and herbal medicines
- Hot and cold therapy
- Yoga, tai chi, or pool therapy
- Acupuncture

**Remember:**
Always use these other treatments *with* your rheumatoid arthritis medicines, not instead of them.

“A hot bath or shower in the mornings makes my joints feel better.”
There are many vitamins and herbal medicines that people try for their rheumatoid arthritis.

Many of these are generally safe. The ones below are proven to help:

• Fish oils and plant oils with omega-3 fatty acids may help your joints stay healthy
• Calcium and vitamin D keep your bones strong

These are not proven to help:

• Turmeric
• Green tea
• Glucosamine and chondroitin sulfate
• Ginger

These are dangerous and should not be used:

• Thunder God Vine
• Combination herbal medicines advertised for rheumatoid arthritis

**Remember:**
Vitamins and herbals are medicines. Bring them to every appointment.
Hot and Cold Therapy

Putting something hot or cold directly on hurting joints helps some people feel better. Try hot and cold to see which works for your pain.

For cold:
• A bag of frozen corn or peas
• A bag of ice
• A reusable cold pack from the drugstore (keep in freezer)
• Over-the-counter creams that feel cold (ask your pharmacist)
• Rubbing alcohol

For hot:
• A heating pad
• Uncooked rice in a sock (warm in microwave)
• A reusable heating pack from the drugstore (warm in microwave)
• Over-the-counter creams that feel hot (ask your pharmacist)

Use heat only if your joint is not already hot when you touch it.
Yoga and Tai Chi

Yoga and tai chi make many people feel better. They also increase your flexibility, mobility, and strength; decrease stress; and improve your mood.

Ask your health care provider or physical therapist before you start yoga or tai chi.

Find instructors experienced with arthritis who can make sure the moves are safe for you.

“Yoga is something that I can do at my own pace. It gives me energy.”
Acupuncture can help joints feel better. During acupuncture, tiny needles (the size of a strand of hair) are put into different parts of the body. Acupuncture done by a licensed professional is safe.

“Acupuncture doesn’t hurt and it helps me manage my pain.”
If you smoke...

Smoking can make rheumatoid arthritis worse and make the medicines less effective.

Quitting is not easy, but it’s not impossible. Many people have stopped smoking, and you can too.

When you are ready to quit:

- Ask your health care provider or pharmacist about medicines to help.
- Pick a “quit date”.
- Tell your friends and family you will stop smoking on your quit date.
- On your quit date, throw away your cigarettes, ashtrays, lighters, matches, and anything else that makes you think about smoking. The harder it is to get a cigarette, the easier it will be to quit.

“When I quit smoking, I felt better.”
Many people wonder what foods they should eat to stay healthy. For most people with rheumatoid arthritis, the best diet is a heart-healthy one. The only foods that might make your joint pain better are foods with omega-3s.

These foods are high in omega-3s:

- Tuna, salmon, trout, sardines, and anchovies
- Broccoli, spinach, kale, mustard greens, and brussels sprouts
- Eggs with extra omega-3
- Walnuts
Since people with rheumatoid arthritis are more likely to develop heart disease, it is important to eat foods that protect your heart. These foods are best for your heart:

**Fruits and Vegetables**
Fruits and vegetables give you many vitamins and minerals and are generally low in fat. Fill half your plate with them. They also make great snacks.

“I hadn’t eaten fresh food in so long. I started with simple things from when I was a kid, like green beans and carrots. Not bad!”
Proteins
Fish is great for your heart. Try salmon or sardines.

White meats like turkey and chicken are leaner than beef and pork.

When you eat beef or pork, choose lean cuts such as sirloin, eye of round, top round, bottom round, or extra lean ground.

Go meatless sometimes. Use tofu, beans, lentils, and nuts for your protein.

Carbohydrates
Eat small amounts of healthy carbohydrates like brown rice, whole wheat bread or pasta, or sweet potatoes.
Think of your plate as different sections. One half is for fruits and vegetables, and the other half is for proteins and healthy carbohydrates. The healthy plate makes it easy to see how much of each kind of food to eat.
Salt makes your blood pressure higher, and high blood pressure is bad for your heart. If you eat less salt, your blood pressure will go down.

A lot of the salt we eat is “hidden” in foods that come in a box, can, or package. These foods have too much salt:

- Canned soups and vegetables
- Frozen dinners
- Cold cuts
- Rice and noodle mixes
- Fast food and pizza
- Chips and pretzels

“Salty foods make my body swell, and that makes my joints hurt.”
Rheumatoid arthritis and some rheumatoid arthritis medicines can weaken your bones. Calcium helps keep your bones strong.

Here are some foods high in calcium:

- Kale, spinach, broccoli, cauliflower, mustard greens, and brussels sprouts
- Milk and cheese *(use low fat when you can)*
- Low-fat yogurt
- Almonds
- Tofu, soy beans, and soy milk
- Calcium-fortified orange juice
How much activity you are able to do may change from day to day, depending on how your joints feel and how much energy you have.

Being active is one of the most important things you can do to:

- Ease pain
- Build strength
- Keep joints strong and flexible so you can do the things you need to do
- Have more energy
- Improve sleep

Today having pain or feeling tired may make it difficult to be active. Once your arthritis is under control, it will be easier.

“Just because I can’t do everything I used to do doesn’t mean I’ve given up. I’ve found ways to make many things easier.”
Physical and Occupational Therapy

Physical therapists work with you to help:

• Keep joints strong

• Build balance and flexibility

• Decrease pain

Physical therapists help you find exercises for your joints.

Occupational therapists help if you have trouble doing everyday activities, like bathing, dressing, cooking, and cleaning.

They may teach you how to:

• Pace your activities

• Use special tools to open jars or button your shirt

If you do not have a physical therapist or occupational therapist, ask your health care provider to help you find one.
There are many tools to help you with your everyday activities.

**Problem:** Have trouble buttoning your shirt?
**Answer:** Use a button fastener.

**Problem:** Pots and pans too heavy?
**Answer:** Use lighter ones.

**Problem:** Doors hard to open?
**Answer:** Use easy-grip knobs or install handles.

**Problem:** Lamps difficult to turn on and off?
**Answer:** Touch lamps or pull chains are easier.

**Problem:** Struggle with zippers?
**Answer:** Zipper pulls can help.
The Arthritis Foundation can help you find these tools if they aren’t available at your drugstore. An occupational therapist can also help you find new ways to do activities that are difficult for you.

- Open jars with rubber pads.
- Use an electric toothbrush with a fat handle.
- Install grab bars.
- Open locks with key extensions.
- Put on shoes with a long-handled shoe horn.
- Get clothes from the dryer with a hook on a stick.
Exercise is important for taking care of your rheumatoid arthritis. Try these:

- Walking
- Lifting light weights or stretching
- Swimming or water exercise
- Yoga or tai chi
- Biking
- Dancing (a class or at home)
- Classes at the gym or community center. Look for ones held by the Arthritis Foundation.

Talk to your health care provider before starting an exercise routine.

“I miss dancing in high heels, but on good days I can still dance barefoot in my kitchen.”
Tips For Staying Active

“Don’t give up. Just know your limits and be patient.”

“You just have to deal with each problem as it comes up.”

“Take a break if your joints hurt more than usual. Listen to your body.”
Warning Signs

Be sure to **STOP** your activity and call your health care provider immediately if:

- You get chest pain or trouble breathing
- Your neck starts to hurt
- You get numbness or tingling in your fingers

It is normal to sometimes feel sore after you exercise or go to physical therapy. This is good. It means you are building your muscle strength.
When you have rheumatoid arthritis, your body may need extra time to get used to being active. Be patient. Your joints may not let you be active every day.

“I know it’s a good day when I can play with my grandkids.”

“It makes me feel better if I exercise every day. Sometimes I can only do a little stretching, but even that helps.”

“On good days, I keep as active as I can. On bad days, I lie on the couch and don’t feel guilty.”
Having rheumatoid arthritis can be stressful. People say they sometimes feel:

- Sad, down, or worried
- Angry, irritable, or grouchy
- Embarrassed or ashamed
- Overwhelmed

You may feel this way when you:

- Are in pain
- Start new medicines with side effects
- Can’t take care of yourself or other people as well anymore
- Notice changes in your hands or feet

You are not alone. These are normal feelings. Everybody has some good days and some bad days.
Coping

Having rheumatoid arthritis can be difficult for you and your family. Share this guide with family or friends. Talk about how you feel with a friend, a counselor, or clergy.

**Important:**

Coping is easier with help. Talk to your health care provider if you:

- Feel tired all the time
- Can’t sleep at all or have trouble getting out of bed all day
- Don’t enjoy anything anymore
- Feel hopeless or like you are a failure
- Have trouble coping with your anxiety
- Feel like you want to hurt or kill yourself or someone else

You don’t have to feel this way. Your health care team can help you feel better.

“Friends look at me like I am totally normal. They just don’t understand my pain.”
“I always felt mad, but I realized my anger was really about my rheumatoid arthritis.”

“Sometimes I worry that I won’t be able to work. I take it one day at a time.”

“Reading my Bible helps me cope.”

“I can’t do everything people ask me to do. But I have learned to offer what I can.”
Relaxing

Taking a few deep breaths will help you relax. Breathe in slowly to a count of four, and then breathe out slowly to a count of four. Repeat for several breaths.

When you are feeling stressed you may also feel better if you:

• Take a walk

• Spend time with a pet

• Hug your kids

• Work on a hobby

• Do a crossword puzzle or play a game

• Read a good book or newspaper

• Take a warm bath or shower

• Meditate or pray
Sleeping well is an important part of taking care of yourself when you have rheumatoid arthritis. If your rheumatoid arthritis is interrupting your sleep, it may be because of:

- Pain
- Medicines you are taking (like prednisone)
- Worry or sadness

“When I don’t get enough sleep it affects my mood.”
"The physical therapist showed me how to use pillows under my legs to get more comfortable in bed."

"I knew I was on the right medicines when I could sleep through the night without pain."

"A warm bath before bed helps put me to sleep."

**Remember:**
If you have trouble sleeping, talk with your health care provider.
People with rheumatoid arthritis can enjoy sex. However, they are often concerned about pain during sex.

If you have pain, you may need to:

- Find new positions that take the stress off your joints
- Use lubrication
- Try new activities

Be open with your partner about which positions and activities are most comfortable. You may need to tell your partner that sex is still enjoyable for you. A counselor can help you and your partner have this conversation.

Remember to always use birth control if you or your partner could get pregnant.

“Talking about sex helped my wife understand what I was going through. It made us closer.”

“We worked it out together. I had to tell him what I could and could not do.”
Changes in your relationships with others may be some of the most difficult parts of having rheumatoid arthritis. Reaching out to others with rheumatoid arthritis or a counselor can help.

“I had to be honest with myself before I could be honest with my family about the things I could do.”

“It really helped to share stories with someone else with rheumatoid arthritis.”

“My co-workers understand that I have bad days.”
Arthritis Foundation

The Arthritis Foundation provides services, funds research for a cure, and is the voice of people with arthritis.

The Arthritis Foundation’s website is the go-to arthritis resource. Go to www.arthritis.org/LivingWithArthritis to find the latest news, information, and resources to help understand and manage your arthritis. With over 2,000 pages of trusted, authoritative content, you will find information about:

• Disease Diagnosis: Special section on rheumatoid arthritis
• Treatments: The latest information on medications, natural therapies, surgery, and more.
• Staying Active: Tips, videos, and routines to help you start a fitness plan and stick with it.
• Eating Well: Explains the benefits of a healthy diet for arthritis and provides tips for making better food choices.
• Tools and Resources: From Weight Loss Guides to Drug Guides, www.arthritis.org/LivingWithArthritis has numerous interactive tools and resources to help you understand and manage your arthritis.

The American College of Physicians (ACP)

The American College of Physicians (ACP) is a diverse community of internal medicine specialists and subspecialists united by a commitment to excellence. Internists apply scientific knowledge and clinical expertise to the diagnosis, treatment, and compassionate care of adults across the spectrum from health to complex illness. With 137,000 members, ACP is the largest medical-specialty organization in the world. ACP and its physician members lead the profession in education, standard-setting, and the sharing of knowledge to advance the science and practice of internal medicine.

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