

Rheumatoid Arthritis



What Is Rheumatoid Arthritis?

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is a disease in which your body's immune system attacks the joints. The joints can become swollen, painful, and stiff. RA can affect any joint, but it most often affects your wrists and fingers. The same joints are usually affected on both sides of the body. Doctors don't know what causes RA. In people who have severe RA, it never goes away. In these cases, it could cause serious joint damage.



What Are the Warning Signs of Rheumatoid Arthritis?

- Joint swelling and tenderness
- Stiffness and pain that lasts for more than 30 minutes in the morning
- Loss of motion and bent or crooked joints
- Feeling tired and sick



How Is Rheumatoid Arthritis Diagnosed?

If you have joint swelling that lasts for more than 6 weeks, see your doctor.

- Your doctor will ask you questions about your symptoms and examine your joints.
- If your doctor thinks you might have RA, you may be referred to a rheumatologist. A rheumatologist is a kind of doctor who specializes in treating people with joint, bone, and muscle problems.
- X-rays and lab tests can provide important information about your condition, but RA can be hard to diagnose. There is no single test for RA, and the symptoms can be the same as for other kinds of joint disease.



How Is Rheumatoid Arthritis Treated?

Your doctor will encourage you to get plenty of rest and to exercise, reduce stress, and follow a healthy diet. You may take medicine to reduce pain and swelling and to stop the disease from getting worse. In some people with severe joint damage, surgery helps reduce pain and improve how the joints work. Your doctor will schedule regular visits to help manage your disease. It is important to see if the medicine is helping, to check for drug side effects, and to change treatment when needed.

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Questions for My Doctor

- Can RA ever be cured?
- Which medicines will be best for me?
- What are other ways to help my symptoms besides medicine?
- What exercises are good for my RA?
- What are the possible side effects of RA medicines?
- Will my daily activities be affected by RA?



Bottom Line

- Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is a disease in which your body’s immune system attacks your joints.
- If you have joint swelling that lasts for more than 6 weeks, see your doctor for evaluation.
- To diagnose RA, your doctor will talk to you about your medical history and your symptoms. Your doctor may order blood tests and X-rays to check for signs of RA.
- Treatment includes medicine to relieve pain and swelling and to stop the disease from getting worse.

For More Information

- **ACP:** www.acponline.org/cgi-bin/cpph.cgi?Live_Better_with_RA.pdf
- **Arthritis Foundation:** www.arthritis.org/about-arthritis/types/rheumatoid-arthritis/
- **National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases:** www.niams.nih.gov/Health_Info/Rheumatic_Disease/default.asp
- **MedlinePlus:** www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/rheumatoidarthritis.html

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