



A closer look at rheumatoid arthritis (RA).

What causes RA.
**And what you can
do about it.**

Better control of your RA can start with a simple idea.

Understanding how **RA works.**

You're already familiar with the symptoms of moderate to severe RA, and how they can affect your daily life, especially your mornings. This brochure was designed to help you understand what RA is, how it's affecting your body, and how you and your doctor can help manage it.



What is RA?

RA is a condition that affects the immune system.

With RA, you may look fine, but your immune system is attacking the healthy tissue around your joints. While scientists and researchers don't know exactly what causes the immune system to go off course, they do know it plays a key role in the inflammation, pain, and joint damage of RA.

When you have RA, certain proteins and cells attack your joints. In excess and over time, they can contribute to the inflammation that may lead to RA damage. These proteins and cells include:

Interleukin-6 (IL-6)

IL-6 is a protein produced by cells of the immune system called white cells. IL-6 plays a major role in RA symptoms like morning stiffness, pain, fatigue, and swelling.

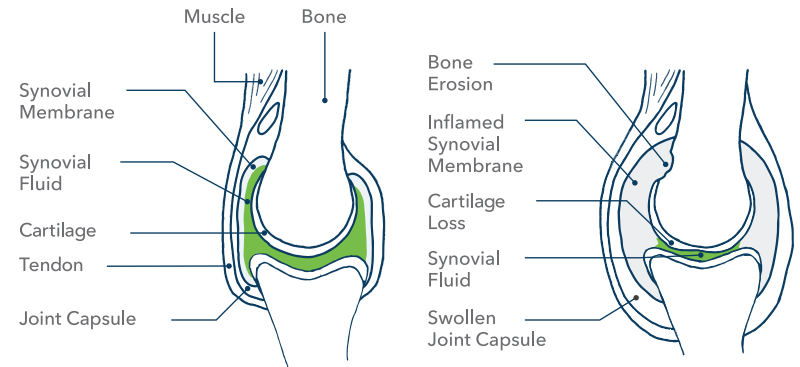
T cell

A T cell is a type of white blood cell that, among other things, helps regulate the immune system. RA is an autoimmune disease where T cells recognize parts of the body as foreign.

TNF

Tumor necrosis factor (TNF) is another immune system protein that promotes inflammation in your body and is responsible for RA symptoms.

Let's take a closer look at how your joints work.



In a healthy joint

There is a lining of tissue known as the synovium. The synovium produces a fluid that cushions and lubricates the joint, allowing bones to move past one another with ease.

In joints with RA

The immune system attacks the synovium, causing it to become inflamed. Inflammation can lead to cartilage loss and bone erosion. The joint space between bones decreases, making it difficult for joints to move. Eventually, bone and joint damage take place.

Which parts of the body does RA affect?

The joints are impacted the most.

Your hands, feet, wrists, elbows, knees, and ankles are most commonly affected by RA. Inflammation often makes it difficult to move these joints both in the morning and throughout the day.

RA can attack more than your joints.

Because you feel RA pain and stiffness in your joints, you may be surprised to learn that RA can damage other parts of your body as well. Over time, it can affect organs and systems.

For this reason, doctors refer to RA as an autoimmune systemic disease. In other words, it may affect the way your whole body system works.



Fast fact.

RA is one of the most common autoimmune disorders—more common than psoriasis, Crohn's disease, multiple sclerosis, and lupus.

—The Arthritis Foundation

RA isn't the same as osteoarthritis (OA).

People who aren't familiar with arthritis often confuse RA with OA. They may think that it is caused by an old sports injury, or an ache you feel every now and then. But RA and OA are very different.

Osteoarthritis:

- Is a **degenerative disease**, which means the cartilage in the joint deteriorates over time
- Is likely to be caused by one of these risk factors:
 - Being overweight, getting older, joint injuries, genetic defects, and stress on joints
- Most commonly affects people over 65
- Primarily affects weight-bearing joints

Rheumatoid arthritis:

- Is an **autoimmune systemic disease**, which means the body attacks itself because it thinks it's injured
- Is progressive and can damage both joints and organs
- Primarily affects the small joints in hands and feet, but can affect any joint—usually on both sides of the body
- Can begin at any age, but often starts between 30 and 60
- Is 2-3 times more common in women than men

What can you do about disease progression?

Simply put, it's important to keep working with your doctor to help control it as best as you can.

That's why you may have already taken a few steps in that direction. You may have tried ways to relieve the pain on your own in the beginning. And your doctor may have prescribed other medications when those no longer worked, including:

Corticosteroids

Medications that imitate the effects of a hormone that's produced by the body to reduce inflammation.

Disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs (DMARDs)

Medications that may help preserve joints by blocking inflammation that could destroy tissue over time.

There's good news.

Most people feel a positive effect fairly soon after the first treatment with a biologic.

—The Arthritis Foundation

As RA progresses, doctors may try different treatments.

When RA worsens, most doctors usually prescribe certain medications called biologics, which are drugs typically derived from human proteins that target specific parts of the immune system.

But for some, those first biologics may stop working, don't work as well as they used to, or can't be tolerated. And a different approach may be necessary.

But now is not the time to sit back. Take an active role.

RA can affect every part of your life. So here are a few suggestions that we've heard from others with RA that may help you take a more active role in managing your RA.

Create some new healthy habits.

You've already introduced RA treatments into your routine, but there are other, new habits that may help your life with RA.

While making big changes may seem like the right thing to do, small, simple changes are actually easier to achieve, and can give you the motivation and confidence to work toward other healthy habits down the road.

Get started in the morning.

It may be easier to flex your joints if they're warm. So try using a lightweight heating blanket on your bed, or take a long, warm shower or bath.

“Research has shown warm water therapy works wonders for all kinds of musculoskeletal conditions, including arthritis.”

—The Arthritis Foundation

Get active.

Exercise—even mild exercise—is good for your health. Whether it's swimming, walking, practicing yoga, or stretching, it may help alleviate some symptoms of RA, like pain and fatigue, and may also help improve joint function and mobility.

However, it's important to talk to your doctor before you start or modify any exercise routine.

Here are some activities to consider:

- Stretching
- Tai chi
- Walking
- Swimming
- Yoga
- Stationary cycling

Eat healthy.

It's always important to maintain a healthy diet, and when it comes to RA, there are some foods that may be beneficial. For example, foods that are high in omega-3 fatty acids are great for reducing inflammation, while dairy and sugar are foods to avoid. You can talk to your doctor or nutritionist for some more ideas.

Here are some ideas of anti-inflammatory foods to consider:

- Fatty fish
- Soy
- Whole grains
- Low-fat dairy
- Dark leafy greens
- Tomatoes
- Nuts
- Beets

Build a support team.

Sometimes, you just can't do it all by yourself. What you may not realize is that you're surrounded by people who are already there, ready to help and support you.

Your team could be:

- Your rheumatologist
- Your primary care doctor
- Your physician assistant or nurse
- A nutritionist or registered dietitian
- An exercise coach
- Your family and friends
- Local support groups

Notes

“Resting the body is an important component of living with RA, especially during a flare-up.”

—Rheumatoid Arthritis Support Network

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