

# Rheumatoid Arthritis

Rheumatoid arthritis, or RA, is the second most common arthritis after osteoarthritis

RA is an autoimmune disease causing inflammation of the joints. An autoimmune disease is when your body's immune system produces a response against tissues or substances naturally present in your body. It is not known what triggers RA, but there is evidence to suggest certain lifestyle factors can increase your likelihood of developing it such as smoking, a high caffeine intake and high red meat consumption. There is also a genetic component to your chances of developing RA.

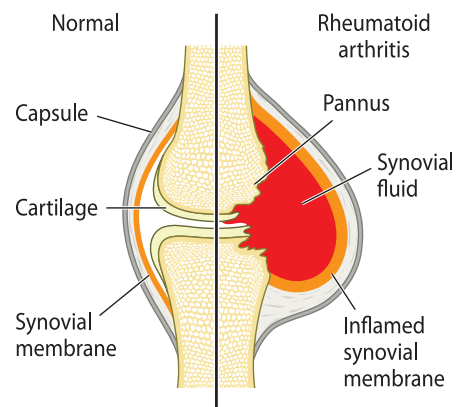
A joint is where two bones meet. Surrounded by the synovium which has a thickened outer layer called the capsule, this structure helps to keep the joint together and lubricate the surfaces to allow for a smooth, gliding movement. In rheumatoid arthritis the synovium comes under attack from the immune system. It becomes inflamed, red and painful. There can be a loss of movement associated with this inflammation, along with heat.



Those with RA will suffer flare-ups whereby the condition goes through episodes of irritation, followed by a period of ease. As this inflammation settles, the capsule becomes baggy and unsupportive as it has been stretched during the period of irritation. As a consequence, the joint becomes weakened, predisposing it to more pain and instability. The cartilage that covers the ends of the bones can wear and develop deformities because of this instability.

Diagnosis is established via a combination of scans, blood tests and a physical examination.

The nature of RA means that the sufferer cannot be cured, but medications and other treatments are very effective in managing the symptoms, which can also include lethargy, anaemia, depression, inflammation of other parts of the body and rheumatoid nodules.



Although it can affect any joint, rheumatoid arthritis tends to start with discomfort and stiffness in one area such as your hands or feet. Swelling tends to then commence with an associated redness and heat. The prognosis varies but the majority of sufferers will continue to have occasional mild episodes of flare-ups. A minority will develop a more severe form of the disease with significant illness and disability.

As those with RA are vulnerable to other complications associated with their condition such as heart attack and stroke, it is vital their condition is managed well.

Treatment tends to be a combination of medication, physiotherapy and in some cases surgery.

Medications can include painkillers and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) to manage the discomfort and swelling. These help the sufferer with symptoms but do not target the disease specifically. Disease-modifying anti-rheumatic drugs (DMARDs) are the key to controlling the disease itself during a flare-up, but can take a few weeks to have an effect. In these cases short-term oral steroids or even injections may be useful while waiting for the DMARDs to take effect.

Physiotherapy focuses on maintaining joint range of movement to prevent stiffness, strengthening the muscles that support your joints to counteract instability and reduce unnecessary wear and tear, and provision of equipment to help joint discomfort and/or improve gait.

Exercises might include balance tasks to hone the control of your joints via your muscles, stretches to keep joint range and strengthening exercises to improve endurance, power and stability.

Exercises tend to be best done little and often in order to reduce the chances of irritating your joints and preventing fatigue. Find ways to tie your rehab in to things you do day to day such as brushing your teeth, making a drink or television adverts.

In some cases a sufferer will see an occupational therapist in order to help improve day to day living and function.



Most RA sufferers will manage with these conservative approaches to treatment, but some may need surgery. This can range from minor procedures to major such as a joint replacement. Surgery can be very effective in improving function and disability for those who undergo it.