

# What Is Rheumatoid Arthritis?

*Fast Facts: An Easy-to-Read Series of Publications for the Public*

Rheumatoid arthritis is a disease that affects the joints. It causes pain, swelling, and stiffness. If one knee or hand has rheumatoid arthritis, usually the other does too. This disease often occurs in more than one joint and can affect any joint in the body. People with this disease may feel sick and tired, and they sometimes get fevers.

Some people have this disease for only a few months or a year or two. Then it goes away without causing damage. Other people have times when the symptoms get worse (flares), and times when they get better (remissions). Others have a severe form of the disease that can last for many years or a lifetime. This form of the disease can cause serious joint damage.

## Who Gets Rheumatoid Arthritis?

Anyone can get this disease, though it occurs more often in women. Rheumatoid arthritis often starts in middle age and is most common in older people. But children and young adults can also get it.

## What Causes Rheumatoid Arthritis?

Doctors don't know the exact cause of rheumatoid arthritis. They know that with this arthritis, a person's immune system attacks his or her own body tissues. Researchers are learning many things about why and how this happens. Things that may cause rheumatoid arthritis are:

- Genes (passed from parent to child)
- Environment
- Hormones.

## How Is Rheumatoid Arthritis Diagnosed?

People can go to a family doctor or rheumatologist to be diagnosed. A rheumatologist is a doctor who helps people with problems in the joints, bones, and muscles. Rheumatoid arthritis can be hard to diagnose because:

- There is no single test for the disease
- The symptoms can be the same as other kinds of joint disease
- The full symptoms can take time to develop.

To diagnose rheumatoid arthritis, doctors use medical history, physical exam, x rays, and lab tests.

U.S. Department of Health  
and Human Services  
Public Health Service

National Institute of Arthritis  
and Musculoskeletal and  
Skin Diseases  
National Institutes of Health  
1 AMS Circle  
Bethesda, MD 20892-3675

Phone: 301-495-4484  
Toll free: 877-22-NIAMS  
TTY: 301-565-2966  
Fax: 301-718-6366  
Email: NIAMSinfo@mail.nih.gov  
Web site: www.niams.nih.gov



## How Is Rheumatoid Arthritis Treated?

Doctors have many ways to treat this disease. The goals of treatment are to:

- Take away pain
- Reduce swelling
- Slow down or stop joint damage
- Help people feel better
- Help people stay active.

Treatment can include patient education, self-management programs, and support groups that help people learn about:

- Treatments
- How to exercise and relax
- How to talk with their doctor
- Problem solving.

These programs help people:

- Learn about the disease
- Reduce pain
- Cope with physical issues and emotions
- Feel more control over the disease
- Build confidence
- Lead full and active lives.

Treatment for rheumatoid arthritis may involve:

- Lifestyle changes
- Medicine
- Surgery
- Regular doctor visits
- Alternative therapies.

## Lifestyle Changes

Here are some ways to take care of yourself:

- Keep a good balance between rest and exercise
- Take care of your joints
- Lower your stress
- Eat a healthy diet.

### Medicine

Most people with rheumatoid arthritis take medicine. Drugs can be used for pain relief, to reduce swelling, and to stop the disease from getting worse. What a doctor prescribes depends on:

- The person's general health
- How serious the rheumatoid arthritis is
- How serious the rheumatoid arthritis may become
- How long the person will take the drug
- How well the drug works
- Possible side effects.

### Surgery

There are many kinds of surgery for people with severe joint damage. Surgery is used to:

- Reduce pain
- Help a joint work better
- Help people be able to do daily activities.

Surgery is not for everyone. Talk about the option with your doctor.

### Regular Doctor Visits

Regular medical care is important so doctors can:

- See if the disease gets worse
- See if drugs are helping
- Look for drug side effects
- Change treatment when needed.

Your care may include blood, urine, and other lab tests and x rays.

### Alternative Therapies

Special diets, vitamins, and other alternative therapies are sometimes suggested to treat rheumatoid arthritis. Some therapies help people reduce stress. Many of these treatments are not harmful, but they may not be well tested or have any real benefits.

People should talk with their doctor before starting an alternative therapy. If the doctor feels the therapy might help and isn't harmful, it can become part of regular care.

### What Research Is Being Done on Rheumatoid Arthritis?

Research is being done in many areas:

- Immune systems
- Genes
- Families with rheumatoid arthritis
- New drugs or drug combinations
- Rheumatoid arthritis and disability
- Preventing related health problems
- Quality of life for people with rheumatoid arthritis.

### For More Information About Rheumatoid Arthritis and Other Related Conditions:

#### **National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases (NIAMS)**

National Institutes of Health

1 AMS Circle

Bethesda, MD 20892-3675

Phone: 301-495-4484

Toll free: 877-22-NIAMS (226-4267)

TTY: 301-565-2966

Fax: 301-718-6366

Email: [NIAMSinfo@mail.nih.gov](mailto:NIAMSinfo@mail.nih.gov)

Web site: [www.niams.nih.gov](http://www.niams.nih.gov)

The information in this publication was summarized in easy-to-read format from information in a more detailed NIAMS publication. To order Rheumatoid Arthritis Handout on Health full-text version, please contact NIAMS using the contact information above. To view the complete text or to order online, visit [www.niams.nih.gov](http://www.niams.nih.gov).

### For Your Information

This fact sheet may contain information about medications used to treat the health condition discussed here. When this fact sheet was printed, we included the most up-to-date (accurate) information available. Occasionally, new information on medication is released.

For updates and for any questions about any medications you are taking, please contact the U.S. Food and Drug Administration at 888-INFO-FDA (888-463-6332, a toll-free call) or visit its Web site at [www.fda.gov](http://www.fda.gov).