

What you need to know about Rheumatoid Arthritis

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is a chronic inflammatory disorder that can affect many joints. RA attacks the lining of your joints and causes painful swelling. In addition to joint swelling in your hands and feet, patients may have a fever, tiredness, bone loss, and joint deformity.

RA occurs when your immune system mistakenly attacks your body's own tissues. RA is two to three times more common in women than in men and typically occurs between the ages of 40 and 60. There is no cure, but treatment options have expanded greatly in the past few decades.

Treatments

Treatment plans typically include drugs and physical therapy. RA drugs can reduce inflammation in your joints. This can relieve pain and slow joint damage. Occupational and physical therapy can teach you how to protect your joints.

Surgery may be needed if the joints become severely damaged. Here are some drugs used to treat RA:

RA drugs

- **Analgesics:** These include painkillers, such as acetaminophen. They usually come in pill form.
- **Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs):** Some of the first treatments available, NSAIDs are usually given as pills. They include ibuprofen or naproxen. Patients have used them for decades to treat pain and inflammation. They are often given as initial treatment to relieve RA symptoms.
- **Steroids:** Steroids can reduce inflammation from RA. However, they have limited ability to reduce the joint damage. Steroids may be injected directly into a joint to relieve severe pain. They can also be taken as a pill to help relieve overall symptoms. Prednisone is a common steroid used to treat RA.
- **Disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs (DMARDs):** drugs affect the immune system by limiting inflammation and reducing the signs and symptoms of RA. DMARDs are now often the first line of treatment. Patients may take DMARDs with NSAIDs and other drugs, if needed. DMARDs such as methotrexate can prevent joint damage and may keep the disease from getting worse. DMARDs can be taken both as pills and by injection. As always, please speak with your doctor before starting any drug regimen.
- **Biologic DMARDs:** The newest drugs used for RA are biologic DMARDs.

Biologic DMARDs help keep the immune system from attacking the body. There are two major types of biologics, each targeting key substances in the immune system.

Patients take DMARDs through injections and intravenous (IV) methods.

The injections are placed into the fat of the skin like other shots you might get in your doctor's office. Biologic DMARDs are infused by a doctor or nurse intravenously. A small needle delivers the drug directly into your vein. This process is known as an infusion. Each method has its own pros and cons.

You should stop taking these medications if you develop a serious infection. Speak with your doctor to determine which method is best for you.^{1,2}



Alternative remedies

Applying hot and cold packs can help ease some of the symptoms of RA. Applying heat can help ease inflammatory pain and relax muscles. Applying cold packs can weaken pain sensations. Cold can also produce a numbing effect and decrease muscle spasms.

Adherence

Drugs prescribed by your doctor should reduce inflammation and decrease joint damage. This will reduce your pain. Controlling your inflammation can help delay any permanent damage to your joints that could lead to surgery. To avoid this advancement of your condition, the National Rheumatoid Arthritis Society recommends you take your drug exactly how and when it is prescribed. Patients who do not take their medications risk having a “flare” and continuing pain and stiffness, joint damage, and disability.²

Ways to simplify your life with RA

Here are some ways to do everyday tasks without aggravating joint pain or causing damage.

- **Learn the proper way to bend, lift, reach, sit, and stand.** Use your palms instead of fingers to lift or carry things. Always lift with your legs. Talk with your doctor or a physical therapist to get other tips.
- **Balance activity with rest.** Listen to your body and know when to take a break. Proper sleep is very important when you have RA. Plan hard activities for times of day when you have more energy and feel your best.
- **Organize your surroundings to best suit your needs.** Whether at home or at work, keep the tools and appliances that you use most within reach. Decrease the need to continuously bend down. Keep heavier objects to the front of the counter to eliminate the need to lift.

¹ RA Treatment. Johns Hopkins. <https://www.hopkinsarthritis.org/arthritis-info/rheumatoid-arthritis/ra-treatment>.

² RA. CDC. <https://www.cdc.gov/arthritis/basics/rheumatoid-arthritis.html>.

The most important thing you can do is listen to your body when trying to do your daily activities. Take a break if a certain activity starts to cause you pain or you start to feel tired. Talk with your doctor if RA is still taking a toll on your daily abilities. They may be able to change your medication regimen or recommend different strategies for managing pain, stiffness, and fatigue.



Nutrition

Although there is no specific diet for RA, there are foods that may reduce symptoms. Following a healthy diet and controlling your weight are important in managing RA. Extra weight stresses your weight-bearing joints, which increases joint pain, stiffness, and inflammation.

The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics provides the following recommendations:

RA nutrition therapy

This nutrition therapy will help you:

- Create a food plan that is healthy and balanced.
- Lower your risks for heart and bone disease.

RA food lists

Recommended Foods

- Follow the guidelines from ChooseMyPlate (<http://www.choosemyplate.gov/>).
- To help protect bones, choose foods high in calcium. Choices include dairy foods (like low-fat or fat-free milk, cottage cheese, or yogurt), spinach, cooked greens (like kale), broccoli, soy milk, tofu, or orange juice with added calcium.
- To help reduce the risk of heart disease, choose foods that are low in bad fats (saturated fat and trans fats) and high in good fats (monounsaturated fats). Choices include fish (especially oily fish like salmon and mackerel); olives, nuts, and seeds; and olive and canola oils.

Foods Not Recommended

- Limit or avoid foods that are high in saturated fats. These include red meat, processed meats, sausage, bacon, and high-fat dairy foods (like cheese, butter, cream cheese, and ice cream).
- Avoid trans fats, which are found in many processed foods such as commercial pastries, cakes, cookies, and doughnuts.
- Go to ChooseMyPlate for more details and specific information for limited saturated fat and trans fats.

Sample one-day menu for RA

Meal	Menu
Breakfast	$\frac{3}{4}$ cup whole grain cereal with 1 cup low-fat or fat-free milk 1 slice whole wheat toast with low trans fat or trans fat-free margarine and 1 tablespoon jam $\frac{1}{2}$ cup fruit juice Coffee or tea
Lunch	1 turkey salad sandwich on 2 slices of whole wheat bread with tomato and lettuce 1 banana 1 cup juice or low-fat or fat-free milk
Evening Meal	3 ounces broiled salmon $\frac{1}{2}$ cup steamed potatoes with parsley $\frac{1}{2}$ cup carrots 1 cup spinach salad with 1 tablespoon olive oil and vinegar 1 whole wheat roll Seasonal fresh fruit 1 cup low-fat or fat-free milk

Note: You can add to this menu. Choose healthy snack foods, and stay within your daily calorie range.

Exercise

Exercise is an important part of managing your symptoms. It can even make activities of daily living easier and less painful.

Make sure you balance exercise and rest. You may exercise more if your symptoms are not bothering you as much. Lessen your exercise routine if your symptoms become worse. Take a break or stop if you have any pain or discomfort.

Check with your doctor before starting any new exercise. They can help you plan an exercise program that is right for you. You can also seek help from a physical therapist. The therapist can recommend exercises for when you feel good and other exercises for when your RA symptoms flare up.

Types of exercise for people with RA

There are three types of exercises recommended for people with RA. They are stretching, strength training, and conditioning.



Stretching exercises

Stretching exercises are the easiest and a good choice when symptoms are bothering you. They include stretching and holding different muscle groups for several seconds. Stretching improves your flexibility. Daily stretching is the

basis for any exercise program. It is also important to stretch so that contractures of the muscle do not develop. Contractures occur when your muscles, joints, tendons, and ligaments become stiff and restrict your range of motion.

Flexibility exercises help your muscles stay stretched and keep your joints working their best. Promote comfortable movement during exercise and other daily activities and help relieve joint stiffness.

Examples include:

- Head turns
- Shoulder circles
- Opening doors
- Wrist bends
- Thumb bends and finger curls
- Walking on tiptoes
- Calf stretches

Strengthening or resistance exercises

These exercises can build the muscle needed for daily living. They also promote strong muscles to help absorb shock and protect your joints. These exercises are done with hand-held or wrap-around weights, elastic bands, or your own body weight.

Examples include:

- Shoulder shrugs
- Forward arm reach
- Trunk twists
- March back-kicks
- Chest stretch

Conditioning exercises: aerobics

Aerobic exercise will help your heart, lungs, blood vessels, and muscles. It can also reduce your risk of heart disease, high blood pressure, and diabetes and improve your endurance, strengthen your bones, control your weight, and reduce depression and anxiety.

Examples include:

- Walking
- Bicycling
- Swimming and other water exercises
- Rowing
- Cross-country skiing

Exercises to avoid if you have RA

In general, you should be careful about high-impact activities that put stress on your joints. If you are interested in trying a high-impact activity, talk to your doctor first. Most important, always listen to your body.

Examples include:

- Jogging, especially on paved roads
- Heavy weight lifting

Resource: Physical Activity Programs. CDC. <https://www.cdc.gov/arthritis/interventions/physical-activity.html>.

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