



Rheumatoid arthritis

CAUSES · SYMPTOMS · TREATMENTS

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What is arthritis?

The word arthritis means inflammation of one or several joints. This inflammation causes pain, swelling, stiffness, and limited ability to move the joint. Arthritis can affect anyone at any age. One common form of arthritis is rheumatoid arthritis (RA), which most commonly involves the joints of the fingers, wrists, elbows, shoulders, knees, ankles and feet.

What is rheumatoid arthritis?

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is an autoimmune disease that happens when the body's immune system mistakenly attacks the lining of the joints, causing too much inflammation leading to pain and swelling of multiple joints of the body. The cause of rheumatoid arthritis is still unknown. The symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis vary widely from person to person. In many cases, rheumatoid arthritis starts in a few joints then spreads to other joints over a few weeks to months. While there is no cure for rheumatoid arthritis, there are many effective treatments to control the symptoms and inflammation. It is important to seek help early to minimize symptoms and damage to your joints and other parts of the body, and to reduce the risk of disability from ongoing inflammation.

What are the early signs of rheumatoid arthritis?

The earliest symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis can include tenderness and stiffness around joints and muscles. You may experience swelling, warmth or redness around affected joints. Rheumatoid arthritis can also cause you to feel unwell with low energy, low-grade fever, and even poor appetite or weight loss. As time goes on, rheumatoid arthritis can involve more and more joints on both sides of the body.

Common joint signs and symptoms include:

- Pain and tenderness of multiple joints
- Swelling of multiple joints
- “Gelling” or stiffness of joints
- Warmth or redness of joints
- Reduced ability to move the joints because of pain and stiffness
- Fever, fatigue, weight loss, or decreased appetite

Symptoms outside the joint may include:

- Sleep disruption
- Low mood or feeling anxious
- Reduced quality of life
- Increased sensitivity to pain



How is rheumatoid arthritis diagnosed?

Your doctor will examine your joints and take your medical history. They may order other tests such as bloodwork and X-rays. If your family doctor suspects you have rheumatoid arthritis, you will be referred to a specialist, called a rheumatologist, who is able to diagnose and treat arthritis.

Why is treatment so important?

It is important to treat rheumatoid arthritis as early as possible to improve your long-term health and preserve a high quality of life. Left untreated, inflammation can permanently damage joints and affect other parts of the body such as the eyes, nerves, skin, heart, or lungs.

Medications

There are many medications to treat the symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis and control the overactive immune system from causing too much inflammation. These treatments reduce inflammation and can prevent long-term damage to the joints and other parts of the body. It is also important to speak to your doctor or pharmacist before trying any treatment available without a prescription.

- **Disease-modifying anti-rheumatic drugs (DMARDs):** DMARDs are arthritis medications designed to modify the immune system's inflammation response. These medications are often taken long-term and can take weeks before their effects are felt. The earlier a DMARD is started, the more effective it can be to suppress inflammation, ease symptoms and prevent joint damage. While DMARDs cannot fix or reverse joint damage that has already occurred, they can stop the disease from progressing.
- **Biologics and biosimilars** are DMARDs that are large protein molecules created from living cells. Each biologic or biosimilar works to more selectively target the immune system to stop inflammation and prevent or slow disease progression.
For more information visit – arthritis.ca/biologics.
- **Corticosteroids** mimic the anti-inflammatory action of cortisol (a natural stress hormone) in our bodies. However, corticosteroids have many potential long-term side effects. Steroids should be used for the shortest period of time, at the lowest dosage that provides benefit.
- **Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs)** are used to control arthritis symptoms, but do not prevent disease progression or damage. They may be taken on an as-needed basis. NSAIDs are not appropriate for everyone.

**For more information visit
arthritis.ca/medication.**



Therapies

A physiotherapist (PT) is a regulated health professional focused on the body's movement and function. They can develop an individualized program designed to help you increase your strength, flexibility, range of motion, and general mobility.

An occupational therapist (OT) is a regulated health professional focused on helping people meaningfully participate in activities of daily life and work. They can develop a program to help lessen your symptoms and improve your function. They can help with redesigning spaces and recommend assistive devices to protect your joints and minimize fatigue.

While there is often a fee for physiotherapy and occupational therapy, these services may be covered by private health insurance, or you may be eligible for a publicly funded program offered by the government or some community service organizations, depending on your situation.



Surgery

Surgery is not common but may be necessary after many years of severe arthritis. The decision to undergo surgery depends on the amount of pain and disability your arthritis is causing, as well as the risks and benefits of surgery. This should be discussed further with your doctor.

**For more information visit
arthritis.ca/surgery**

Self-management

You can learn ways to cope with symptoms and make lifestyle changes that may reduce pain and improve joint function and your mood.

**For more information online, visit
Arthritis Society Canada's free learning
resources at arthritis.ca/rheumatoid.**



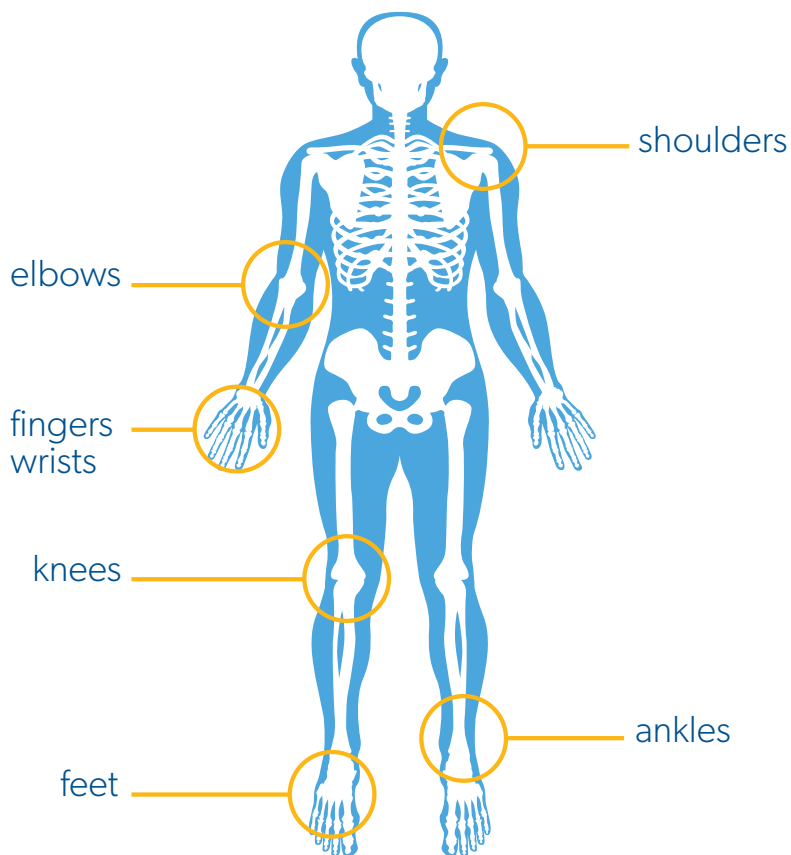
Protecting your joints

You should always use your joints in ways that avoid excess stress.

Tips to protect your joints include:

- **Pace yourself:** Alternate heavy or repeated tasks with lighter tasks. Take breaks when needed.
- **Keep joints properly aligned:** Putting weight on your joints in an awkward position can add strain. A physiotherapist can help you understand joint alignment.
- **Avoid excess joint stress:** Certain activities can place excessive stress on joints, such as hard labour, heavy lifting, repeated squatting or repetitive movements. If you have to do these tasks, you can try using assistive devices to make the tasks easier or speak to a trained professional such as an occupational therapist, who can help you learn how to do them safely.
- **Support your joints with proper footwear:** To avoid extra strain on your joints, save high heels for special occasions and choose supportive flat shoes or low, wide heels for everyday wear.
- **Use assistive devices as needed,** such as a raised seat, reacher, cane or walker.

Joints Most Commonly Affected by Rheumatoid Arthritis





Heat and cold therapy



Taking a hot bath or using a warm pack are great ways to help reduce pain and stiffness. Always use a protective barrier, such as a towel, between the warm pack and your skin. Paraffin wax therapy may provide relief for hands and feet. Talk to your doctor before trying this at home. Heat is ideal for relieving pain, muscle spasms and tightness, as well as enhancing range of motion.



Applying cold to a painful joint can help reduce swelling and inflammation. You can use a cold pack, a bag of ice cubes, or a bag of frozen vegetables for short-term relief. Always use a protective barrier, such as a towel, between the cold pack and your skin. Cold is ideal for reducing swelling and decreasing pain.



Physical activity and exercise

Physical activity is any movement that increases your heart rate through activation of your muscles, including activities that you do as part of everyday life – such as vacuuming, walking, and gardening. Light or moderate physical activity can help by strengthening muscles around joints, increasing blood flow and promoting normal joint regeneration. Too little activity can cause muscle weakness and worsen joint pain and stiffness. The Canadian 24-hour Movement Guidelines recommend several hours of light physical activities, including standing, each day. This can include going for a walk with friends or preparing a meal with family. Choose to walk more often instead of using a car or public transit or stretch for 10 minutes after every hour of inactivity. However, when you are experiencing a flare or your joint is swollen and hot, you should rest the joint and only perform light range of motion exercises.

Exercise is physical activity that involves heavier, repetitive exertion, and is designed to improve or maintain physical fitness. Walking, stretching, cycling, yoga, and water exercise are good options for arthritis. Targeted exercise for your joints may have added benefit. A qualified physiotherapist can work with you to develop an exercise program that is tailored to you.

What types of exercise are recommended for rheumatoid arthritis?

- **Range of motion exercises:** These are also called stretching or flexibility exercises. Exercises that keep your joints moving can reduce pain and stiffness.
- **Strengthening exercises:** Exercises that maintain or increase muscle tone and protect your joints. These resistance-based exercises include weight-training movements done with a set of free weights, your own body weight, resistance bands or weight machines.
- **Endurance exercises:** Exercises that strengthen your heart, give you energy, control your weight and help improve your overall health. Examples include walking, swimming and cycling. It is best to avoid high-impact exercises like step aerobics, jogging or kickboxing.

While many exercise options can be beneficial, activities like yoga or tai chi that combine muscle strengthening, balance, flexibility, and endurance exercises can be particularly helpful for the management of rheumatoid arthritis. These exercises can also be meditative, promoting relaxation and increasing capacity to cope with arthritis.

**Consult your healthcare provider
for suitable exercises for you.**

Eating well

Sometimes rheumatoid arthritis results in loss of appetite and/or unplanned weight loss, which is why it is important to eat a balanced diet. Having a nutritionally balanced diet can also provide more energy to complete your daily activities as well as to promote a strong immune system, and bone and tissue health.

Three ways to improve your nutrition include:

- **Choose “healthy fats”:** A healthy diet should include modest amounts of unsaturated fats. Saturated and trans fats should be limited. Choosing the right amount and types of fats can help you achieve and maintain a healthy body weight and improve your overall health. Olive oil and cold-water fish such as salmon, trout or herring are examples of healthy choices.
- **Reduce sugar intake:** Sugar contains “empty” calories and has no nutritional value. This includes honey and syrup as well as white, brown, cane and raw sugar. Limit or avoid adding sugar to drinks and cereals. Although artificial sweeteners contain fewer calories, it is best to get used to food being less sweet. Use dried, unsweetened fruit like raisins, cherries or dates to sweeten cereals since they provide vitamins, minerals and fibre.
- **Eat more vegetables and fruit:** Vegetables and fruit should make up the largest component of your diet. Keep in mind that the sweetest fruits have high sugar content so it is best not to overdo it. Try to have at least one vegetable or fruit at every meal and while snacking. Besides being an excellent source of energy, vegetables and fruit boost your fibre intake, which helps with digestion and weight management. They are also loaded with antioxidants, which help boost the immune system and may help maintain healthy cartilage.

**Consult a registered dietitian
for more information.**



Relaxation and coping skills

Developing good relaxation and coping skills can help you maintain balance in your life, giving you a greater feeling of control over your arthritis. Relaxing the muscles around a sore joint reduces pain.

Complementary therapies

People with a chronic disease like rheumatoid arthritis may decide to try complementary and alternative therapies to help them manage the symptoms of their condition.

These might include:

- Acupuncture
- Meditation
- Massage
- Naturopathic medicine



ABOUT ARTHRITIS SOCIETY CANADA

Arthritis Society Canada represents the six million people in Canada living with arthritis today, and the millions more who are impacted or at risk. Fueled by the trust and support of our donors and volunteers, Arthritis Society Canada is fighting arthritis with research, advocacy, innovation, information and support.

For more information, visit arthritis.ca

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