

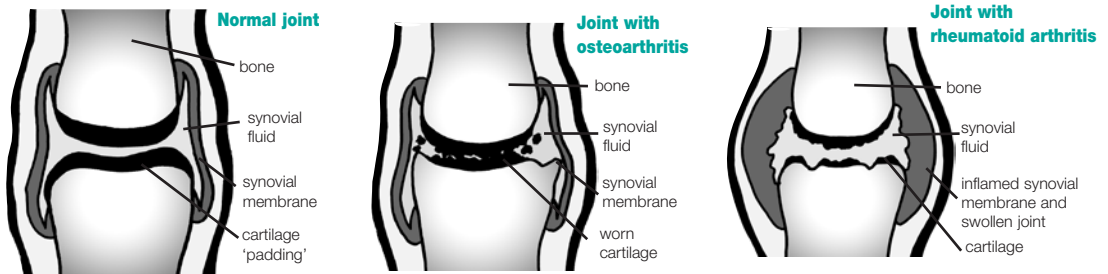


Pharmaceutical
Society of Australia



Rheumatoid Arthritis

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is an immune system disorder which causes swelling, pain and stiffness in joints. It can lead to joint deformity and may also affect other body organs. Treatment includes medicines, joint care and lifestyle changes and if started early, it can prevent or limit joint damage.



In rheumatoid arthritis the tissue that lines joints (synovial membrane) is attacked by the body's own immune system. Tear glands, salivary glands, blood vessels and lung and heart tissue can also be affected. The trigger for RA is unknown.

Signs and symptoms

RA most commonly affects hands, knees and feet and usually affects the same joints on both sides of the body at the same time.

Symptoms vary from person to person and include:

- Warm, swollen, painful joints
- Joint stiffness, more noticeable in the morning
- Loss of joint motion
- Muscle weakness
- Persistent tiredness
- Rheumatoid nodules – small painless lumps under the skin.

Symptoms may vary from mild to severe, may move from joint to joint and may flare-up and subside. Over time damaged joints may lose their shape, alignment and function.

Blood tests

Blood tests can help to diagnose RA and monitor treatment. These tests measure:

- Indicators of tissue inflammation such as *C-reactive protein (CRP)* and *Erythrocyte Sedimentation Rate (ESR)*

- Antibodies associated with RA such as *Rheumatoid factor (RF)* and *Anti-CCP*.

Management

Management programs for RA aim to prevent or limit joint damage and maintain quality of life.

They include medicines to relieve symptoms and stop disease activity and strategies to reduce pain, maintain joint function and manage the tasks of daily living. Doctors, pharmacists, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, podiatrists and dietitians can help.

Medicines

- **Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAID)** (e.g., aspirin, diclofenac, ibuprofen, naproxen) – reduce joint pain, swelling and stiffness. Some can be purchased without a doctor's prescription. They must be used with care to avoid serious gastrointestinal, heart and kidney problems.
- **Cox-2 inhibitor NSAIDs** (e.g., celecoxib, meloxicam) – types of NSAIDs that may cause less gastrointestinal problems.
- **Pain relievers** – Paracetamol may relieve pain without causing serious adverse effects. For optimal pain relief, paracetamol needs to be taken *regularly three or four times a day*. Sometimes stronger opiate pain relievers are needed (e.g., codeine, morphine, oxycodone, tramadol).

- **Fish Oils** – the omega-3 fatty acids found in fish oils have anti-inflammatory effects and can reduce joint pain and stiffness and reduce the need for NSAIDs. The dose of omega-3 fatty acids recommended for arthritis may be taken as fish oil capsules or liquid and may need to be taken regularly for 2 to 3 months before symptoms improve. Ask a doctor or pharmacist for advice.
- **DMARDS** (disease-modifying anti-rheumatic drugs) (e.g., methotrexate, hydroxychloroquine, sulfasalazine, d-penicillamine, gold, leflunomide, azathioprine, cyclosporin, cyclophosphamide) – DMARDS suppress the immune system to slow down or stop disease activity. Early treatment with a DMARD can prevent or limit damage to joints and other organs. They may take weeks to months to act and must be closely monitored to avoid serious adverse effects.
- **Biological DMARDS** (e.g., etanercept, infliximab, adalimumab, anakinra) – DMARDS block the actions of body proteins involved with inflammation. They are given by injection and may improve symptoms within a few days. They must be closely monitored to avoid serious adverse effects.
- **Corticosteroids** (e.g., prednisolone, prednisone) – reduce inflammation and immune system activity and can quickly and dramatically improve symptoms. They can be taken orally or injected into joints. Steroids can cause serious adverse effects and are usually only used for short periods to control severe inflammation.
- **Complementary medicines** – evidence suggests that some herbal medicines may relieve some symptoms of RA. Ask a doctor, pharmacist or naturopath for advice.

Self care

Learn about RA and the ways to manage it. Join a support group.

Pain relief

- Take medicines regularly, according to directions.
- Maintain good posture to limit stress on joints and muscles.
- Warm towels, hot packs, or a warm bath or shower can relieve pain and stiffness.
- Cold packs can reduce pain and swelling.

Your **Self Care** Pharmacist

A doctor or physiotherapist can advise how and when to use heat and cold therapy.

Rest and joint care

Learn to recognise when your body and joints need to rest and learn ways to protect joints during daily activities. Walking aids and splints can help protect joints. An occupational therapist or 'Independent Living Centres Australia' can advise on splints and mechanical aids to help with daily tasks.

Exercise

Exercise regularly to improve mood, decrease pain, increase flexibility and strengthen muscles, bones and ligaments. Warm water exercise is especially helpful as the warmth and buoyancy of the water makes movement easier. A physiotherapist can advise on appropriate exercises.

Healthy lifestyle

- Eat regular, healthy meals, including plenty of fruits, vegetables and grain foods. Limit foods high in fat, sugar or salt. A dietician can advise on foods containing omega-3 fatty acids that may help reduce inflammation.
- Keep to a healthy weight to limit stress on joints.
- Don't smoke – smokers are more likely to get RA.

Related fact cards

- *Osteoarthritis*
- *Pain Relievers*
- *Preventing Falls*
- *Relaxation Techniques*
- *Weight and Health*

For more information

Arthritis Australia – phone 1800 011 041 or website www.arthritisaustralia.com.au

Australian Rheumatology Association – website www.rheumatology.org.au

HEALTHInsite – www.healthinsite.gov.au

Independent Living Centres Australia – phone 1300 885 886 or website www.ilcaustralia.org

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI) leaflets – your pharmacist can advise on availability.

NPS Medicines Line – phone 1300 888 763 Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm EST.

The Poisons Information Centre – in case of poisoning phone 131 126 from anywhere in Australia.

Pharmacists are medicines experts. Ask a pharmacist for advice when choosing a medicine.