

PREPARING FOR YOUR FIRST VISIT TO A RHEUMATOLOGIST

A Guide for Patients

A SPECIALIST MAY HELP DIAGNOSE THE CAUSE OF YOUR SYMPTOMS

If your primary care doctor **suspects you have rheumatoid arthritis (RA)**, they will refer you to a specialist.



A **rheumatologist** is a specialist who can help detect, diagnose, and manage patients who have rheumatic diseases like RA.¹ Rheumatic diseases are diseases that affect joints, muscles, and bones.

Your rheumatologist can get you on a plan to help you manage your symptoms. It is **important to schedule your appointment** with a specialist **to confirm your diagnosis and begin a management plan**.

MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR RHEUMATOLOGIST VISIT

Before Your Visit

✓ **Create a timeline of your symptoms.**

→ Write down your symptoms and try to remember how long you have had them. If your symptoms have changed, be sure to write down the details. Bring the timeline to your first visit.

✓ **Write down any questions you may have for your rheumatologist.**

→ You may have questions about your pain and other symptoms. Be sure to write them down before your appointment so you can ask your rheumatologist.

✓ **Gather your family history.**

→ Find out if members of your family may have a similar medical condition. Ask your parents, grandparents, brothers, sisters, or other relatives about their health.

✓ **Bring any medications to your appointment.**

→ Put all medicines into a bag to take to your appointment. Include prescription medicines, vitamins, and any other over-the-counter medicines (such as aspirin) that you may be taking.

During Your Visit

✓ **Be honest and open with your rheumatologist.**

→ Talk to your doctor about how your symptoms may be affecting your life.

- Explain what symptoms you have been experiencing. Explain how long you have had these symptoms
- Describe the pain you are feeling (dull, sharp, aching, etc)
- Let your doctor know if the pain makes you feel sick or tired. Talk about any other feelings you may have about your pain
- Tell your doctor if the pain made you stop doing activities you used to enjoy doing
- If anything makes your pain feel better or worse, tell your doctor

→ Discuss your family history with your rheumatologist.

→ Show your medicines to your rheumatologist.

✓ **Be prepared to answer questions, but don't be afraid to ask them, too.**

→ After you describe your symptoms and how you are feeling, your rheumatologist may ask you some follow-up questions. Be sure to answer all questions honestly, because the doctor has good reasons for asking them. If you have any questions about what may be causing your symptoms or how to relieve them, be sure to ask!

✓ **A physical exam and tests may be performed.**

→ Once your rheumatologist has spoken with you about your symptoms, **a physical exam will be performed.** Your rheumatologist will check you for areas of **inflammation** (swelling, warmth, rashes) and see if you have any sore joints. You may be asked to bend and stretch your joints so your doctor can see how they may be affected. Although this may cause some pain, the rheumatologist needs to evaluate your movements.

Your rheumatologist may also need to **perform blood testing.** Blood tests can reveal signs of inflammation.² Imaging tests, such as **X-rays**, will show pictures of your joints that can be monitored for changes over time.²

These tests help your rheumatologist make an accurate diagnosis.

✓ **Next steps and the road ahead.**

→ After the discussion, physical exam, and testing, **your rheumatologist** will decide which approach may be right for you. Your doctor **can work with you to develop a management plan.** Ask questions if you are unsure about this plan.

You can also ask your rheumatologist where you can get more information about your disease. They can direct you to appropriate educational resources that may be available.

Be sure your primary care physician receives information about your diagnosis and management plan.

After Your Visit



Follow your rheumatologist's management plan.



Stay positive and keep active.



Keep both your rheumatologist and primary care physician informed of your progress. Be sure to keep seeing your primary care doctor for routine visits.



Learn about your condition and ask questions about things you don't understand.



Schedule all follow-up appointments and make sure you keep them.



Talk to family members or friends about your condition. They can help you cope with your disease and any feelings you may have about it.

YOU AND YOUR RHEUMATOLOGIST CAN WORK TOGETHER TO UNCOVER THE CAUSE OF YOUR SYMPTOMS AND PREPARE A MANAGEMENT PLAN THAT IS RIGHT FOR YOU.

References

1. American College of Rheumatology. What is a rheumatologist? http://www.rheumatology.org/Practice/Clinical/Patients/What_is_a_Rheumatologist_/. Updated April 2015. Accessed January 26, 2016. 2. Mayo Clinic. Diseases and Conditions. <http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/rheumatoid-arthritis/basics/definition/con-20014868>. Accessed May 5, 2015.