



# LIVING WITH RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS (RA)

## UNDERSTANDING YOUR DIAGNOSIS

You may have questions about your diagnosis. This brochure gives you information about RA and what you can do to help manage it. It's important to know that RA is a lifelong condition, but it can be managed so that you don't have to live in pain.<sup>1,2</sup> Be sure to talk with your health care team about the best plan for you.

# WHAT IS RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS?



RA is an autoimmune disease that can cause permanent joint damage.<sup>1</sup> Examples of other autoimmune diseases are psoriasis, multiple sclerosis, lupus, and type 1 diabetes.<sup>3,4</sup>

RA is a lifelong disease that causes pain, stiffness, and swelling in your joints, which is where your bones come together.<sup>1,2</sup> RA may also cause weight loss, tiredness, and skin conditions in addition to loss of function in your joints.<sup>1,2</sup>



## WHAT CAUSES RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS?

There is no known cause for RA.

Some factors may increase your risk for the disease, such as a **family history** or **environmental factors, including smoking**.<sup>5</sup> Also, **women are more likely than men** to develop RA. The disease typically begins **between the ages of 35 and 50**, but it can happen at any age.<sup>6</sup>



## WHAT IS HAPPENING IN MY BODY?

RA occurs when your body's immune system mistakenly attacks healthy tissue. This causes inflammation (pain, stiffness, swelling) in the joints and makes it hard for you to move.<sup>2</sup>



## HOW COMMON IS IT?

As many as 1.3 million people in the United States have RA.<sup>7</sup> A diagnosis of RA doesn't have to be life changing. Your doctor can help you find the best way to manage the condition.

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### RA can cause joint damage over time

Over time, RA can cause cartilage loss and bone erosion, leading to **joint damage that cannot be reversed**.<sup>8</sup> This damage can begin to take place within the first year of the disease.<sup>2</sup> But the **damage may be slowed with an appropriate management plan**.

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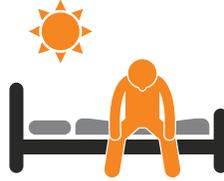
## WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS?

If you have RA, you may have some or all of these symptoms.

**Be sure to tell your doctor all of your symptoms.**<sup>1</sup> Your doctor needs to know if your pain is stopping you from doing your regular activities like dressing or walking the dog.



Tender, warm, swollen joints



Morning stiffness that may last for an hour or more



Tiredness, fever, and weight loss

At first, you may feel pain only in the **small joints of your hands and feet**. But, as the disease progresses, you may feel pain in more places, such as your wrists, knees, ankles, elbows, hips, and shoulders. **It is common for the symptoms to occur in the same joints on both sides of your body.**<sup>1</sup>

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### Be sure to tell your doctor about all of your symptoms, at each visit

Does your joint pain make it hard to get out of bed in the morning?

Does your pain make it hard to go about your daily activities?<sup>1</sup>

Talk to your doctor about your symptoms. Your doctor can help you decide the best way to manage your RA.

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## HOW IS RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS DIAGNOSED?

RA can be hard to diagnose at first because some of the symptoms are the same as for other diseases and other types of arthritis.<sup>2</sup>

You may first discuss your symptoms with your primary care doctor. From there, your doctor may refer you to a specialist, called a rheumatologist. **A rheumatologist can help diagnose and manage patients who have joint diseases like RA.** To get the right diagnosis, the rheumatologist will<sup>9</sup>:

- Examine you and ask you detailed questions about your symptoms and medical history
- Look for signs of joint inflammation
- Potentially require blood tests
- May order x-rays to determine if there is any joint damage

Sometimes, your primary care doctor will order the blood tests and x-rays. But **a rheumatologist is usually the doctor who confirms the diagnosis and helps develop a management plan that works for you.**

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### Seeing a specialist

It's important to see a rheumatologist as soon as your primary care doctor thinks you may have RA. Getting a confirmed diagnosis and starting on a management plan can help prevent joint damage. **Together, you and your health team, along with the support of your family and friends, can make a big difference in your well-being.**

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## HOW IS RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS DIFFERENT FROM OTHER TYPES OF ARTHRITIS?

Many types of arthritis affect people of all ages. Osteoarthritis, or OA, is the most common form of arthritis and has some of the same symptoms as RA.<sup>10</sup>

### OA

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With OA, the **joint pain and stiffness tend to get worse after activity and throughout the day.**<sup>11</sup>

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### RA

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With RA, **symptoms tend to be worse after long rest and lack of activity.**<sup>2</sup>

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## WHAT CAN I EXPECT WITH A DIAGNOSIS OF RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS?

Starting in the first year, RA can cause joint damage and bone erosion.<sup>1,2</sup> Many people with RA often have **periods where the symptoms may lessen and then periods where it gets worse, or “flares.”** During disease flares, RA is more active and may cause more constant symptoms.<sup>2</sup> Early diagnosis and appropriate management can **reduce the likelihood of permanent joint damage.**<sup>5</sup> It's important to **talk with your doctor about your symptoms as soon as you notice them.**



## WILL I ALWAYS BE IN PAIN?

For many people with RA, the symptoms tend to get worse—or flare—at certain periods, and get better at other times. During a flare, you may<sup>2</sup>:

- Be more tired
- Have a fever
- Experience painful, swollen, and tender joints

Some factors may trigger flares, but symptoms can often be managed with treatments.<sup>2</sup>



## HOW SOON DOES RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS CAUSE JOINT DAMAGE?

Joint damage can begin early in the course of the disease. It can happen within the first years.<sup>2</sup> **This is why an early diagnosis and the right disease-management plan are so important.**

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### What else should I know about RA?

Having RA puts you at risk for other serious conditions, such as eye, lung, and skin conditions, heart disease, depression, and anxiety.<sup>1,2</sup> Make sure you continue to see your primary care doctor regularly to monitor for these conditions.

**Ask your doctor about your risks for these complications, and tell him or her if you think you may have any symptoms.**

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## WILL JOINT DAMAGE GET WORSE, AND CAN IT BE STOPPED?

Once joint damage occurs, it can't be reversed. By getting diagnosed as soon as you notice symptoms and **starting on an appropriate management plan, you can help manage the disease and reduce the likelihood of permanent joint damage.**<sup>1,5</sup>



## IS THERE A CURE FOR RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS?

Although no known cure for RA exists, certain medicines can help control symptoms and prevent further joint damage.<sup>1</sup> Many available options can help stop the pain and slow down the disease, or stop joint damage.<sup>2</sup> Ask your doctor about the best management plan for you.



## WHAT IF MY SYMPTOMS GET WORSE?

Be sure to tell your doctor if your symptoms change or get worse. Your doctor may need to make changes to your management plan if your symptoms do not get better.



## CAN I STOP TAKING MY MEDICINE IF I AM FEELING BETTER?

Do not stop taking your medicine without first talking with your doctor. It is important to continue to take your medicine even when you are feeling better.

If you are considering dietary supplements (such as vitamins or herbals) or mind and body practices (such as yoga), keep in mind<sup>12</sup>:

- Speak with your health care team before taking supplements, over-the-counter medicines, or other remedies
- Mind and body practices may be helpful in addition to taking your medicine. Talk to your doctor before starting any practices

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### Your RA management plan

Be sure to let your doctor know if your RA is not under control or if your current management plan is not working. Always take your medicine as prescribed even if you are feeling better. Talk with your doctor before making any changes.

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### REMEMBER:

- RA is a lifelong condition but it can be controlled<sup>1,2</sup>
- You may feel pain in the small joints of your hands and feet, at first<sup>1</sup>
- Continue to see your rheumatologist to help you manage the disease
- Tell your doctor all of your symptoms, at every visit
- RA can cause joint damage and bone erosion. This is why early diagnosis and an appropriate management plan are so important<sup>1</sup>

# YOUR ROLE IN MANAGING RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS





## LIVE A HEALTHY LIFESTYLE WITH RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS

Take care of your body. Follow your treatment plan and these self-care tips to help control your RA symptoms.<sup>2,5,13</sup>



**Keep a healthy diet.** Eat a well-balanced diet, including healthy choices such as vegetables, fruits, and nuts

→ Talk to your doctor about your diet and what you can do to help manage your RA



**Balance periods of activity and rest.** Muscle-strengthening and flexibility exercises can be beneficial in managing RA. However, taking breaks throughout the day is also important. More rest may be needed when you are having a flare and joints are painful, swollen, or stiff

→ Speak with your health care team before beginning an exercise program or a new physical activity



**Find ways to relax.** Living with RA may make you angry, scared, or fearful at times and add stress to your life. It's important to have ways you can cope with your stress

→ There are relaxation methods and support groups that may be helpful

→ Ask your health care team to help you determine the best way to reduce stress



**Follow your management plan,** and take any medicines prescribed on time, even when you are feeling better



**Stay positive**



**Get the support you need** from family and friends. Talk to your loved ones about your disease



**Be sure to let all of your doctors know you have RA** so they can monitor you for other serious conditions



**Stop smoking**

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### Take control of RA

Talk to your health care team about ways you can cope with RA, and have a plan in place. Stay active, but know your limits, including when to rest. And make sure you have a strong support team to help you stay positive.



## KEEP TRACK OF YOUR TREATMENT TEAM

If you have RA, you may have a whole health care team to help you manage the disease. This includes specialists and your primary care provider. You are also part of the team, and it is important that you take an active role in managing your care. Together, you and your care team can manage your RA to improve both your physical and emotional health.

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### Work with your health care team

- Understand the role of each team member
  - Know which team member to contact for questions, concerns, and changes in management
  - Be honest and open about how you're feeling, both physically and emotionally
  - Ask questions when you have them
  - Stay an active member of your health care team
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## Core Team

### Primary Care Physician

Your primary care physician is:

Contact information:

### Rheumatologist

Your rheumatologist is:

Contact information:



## Your Team May Also Consist Of

### **Nurse Practitioner (NP), Physician Assistant (PA), Nurse**

Your NP/PA/Nurse is:

Contact information:

### **Social Worker/Case Manager** (helps coordinate your care)

Your social worker/case manager is:

Contact information:

### **Nutritionist/Dietitian** (helps with your diet and exercise plan)

Your nutritionist/dietitian is:

Contact information:

### **Psychologist, Psychiatrist** (can help you cope with the emotional stress of RA)

Your psychologist/psychiatrist is:

Contact information:

### **Orthopedist** (specializes in treatment and surgery of the joints)

Your orthopedist is:

Contact information:

### **Physical Therapist** (works with you to improve joint function)

Your physical therapist is:

Contact information:

### **Occupational Therapist** (teaches you ways to protect joints and reduce pain)

Your occupational therapist is:

Contact information:



## MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR OFFICE VISITS

### ✔ **Prepare for every visit.**<sup>1</sup>

Write a list to help you remember:

- Record symptoms (when they started, how long they lasted, how well you can do everyday tasks)
- Write down questions you want to ask
- Make a list of medications you take (including supplements and over-the-counter medicines) to share with your health team

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#### **Ask your doctor:**

- What might be causing my symptoms?
  - What treatments are available, and which do you recommend for me?
  - How long will it take before I see improvement in my symptoms?
  - I have other medical conditions. How can I manage these conditions together?
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✔ **Be organized.** Write down questions you have and make a list of any new medicines before your visit. This will help you make the best use of time during your visit.

✔ **Repeat important information.** When your doctor shares important information, repeat it back in your own words to make sure you understand it. Write it down so you don't forget.

- Ask questions, and ask for explanations if you don't understand the answers
- Call the office after your visit if you forget to ask something

✔ **Be open and honest.** Describe the ways RA affects you, both physically and emotionally.

- If you haven't been following your treatment plan, tell your health care team why. Together, you can make adjustments that may work better for you

✔ **Participate in all decision making.** Express your concerns and opinions so you and your health care team can come up with a plan that works best for you. Create an effective communication system.

✔ **Consider bringing a family member or friend with you.** They can help you remember important points after the visit and provide emotional support.



## REMINDER CHECKLIST

- Get to know all the members of your health care team, and find out what they can do to help you
- Speak with members of your care team regularly
- Prepare for every visit
- Participate in all decision making. Ask questions about things you don't understand
- Discuss your symptoms and any concerns you have
- Work with your health care team to make sure your management plan works for you
- Remind your other health care providers that you have RA. This information can help them understand your health risks
- Continue to live a healthy lifestyle, maintain your weight, and exercise regularly
- Inform your care team if you have travel plans, and ask if any precautions need to be taken before you travel
- Learn more about RA. Find out about any educational programs you should attend
- Be positive. Find activities and people that help you stay positive. Let others help you when you need it
- Turn to your loved ones for support. They can help make a big difference in your well-being



## WHERE CAN I FIND MORE INFORMATION ABOUT RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS?

Having RA can impact many areas of your life. It can be hard on those around you. It can make working more difficult. Ask your doctor about support groups and where you can find more information about living with RA. Some helpful websites are:

→ **Arthritis Foundation**

[www.arthritis.org](http://www.arthritis.org)

Get information about RA, learn about resources, and find tips for healthy living with arthritis

→ **Mayo Clinic**

[www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/rheumatoid-arthritis/basics/definition/con-20014868](http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/rheumatoid-arthritis/basics/definition/con-20014868)

Learn about the disease, treatment, and lifestyle management

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

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

Get facts and find out the latest research about RA and other related conditions

→ **Johns Hopkins Arthritis Center**

[www.hopkinsarthritis.org/patient-corner/patient-webcasts/rheumatoid-arthritis-for-patients](http://www.hopkinsarthritis.org/patient-corner/patient-webcasts/rheumatoid-arthritis-for-patients)

Watch an educational video series on what it means to have RA

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