

Rheumatoid Arthritis

A GUIDE FOR ADULT PATIENTS

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What is Rheumatoid Arthritis?

Arthritis is a term used to describe conditions that involve pain and inflammation in the joints. There are over 100 different types of arthritis. Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA) is the most common type of inflammatory arthritis. When a joint is inflamed it is painful, swollen, hot and stiff. This inflammation is in the lining of the joints, and if it is not controlled, it will cause permanent damage to the bone and cartilage. RA affects ~1% of the adult population and affects women more than men. RA can start at any age but most commonly occurs in the 30-50 age group.

What is the cause of Rheumatoid Arthritis?

The cause of RA is not yet known but there is continuing research. It seems most likely that a virus triggers the person's immune system to react in an abnormal way. This produces inflammation in the lining of the joints. We don't know why this causes continuing joint inflammation. We do know that there is an inherited gene that makes some people more likely to get RA. Not everyone with this gene will get RA.

How do I know if I have Rheumatoid Arthritis?

When RA starts it may be sudden or gradual. The pain or stiffness with swelling in joints is usually worse in the morning. Any joint may be involved but it commonly starts in the fingers, wrists and feet. RA usually involves many joints but at onset there may be only one or two joints affected. Your doctor will look for clues that might suggest the joint inflammation could be another type of arthritis. Blood tests help give clues but there is no blood test to completely diagnosis RA. It often takes months to confirm a diagnosis of RA.

What treatments are available?

Modern medications can control most of the joint inflammation. There is no cure at this time but the impact of RA can be minimized. It is important to start medications early. Your doctor will discuss these with you and probably will refer you to an arthritis specialist or rheumatologist. It is important to remember that the small risks associated with medications are worth taking to prevent permanent joint damage.

Regular exercise is important. With painful joints you may need to see a physical therapist. You will learn how to exercise inflamed joints safely and how to stay fit. An occupational therapist can advise you how to reduce stress to your joints while continuing your daily activities.

Lifestyle issues are also important. These include a healthy diet, weight control, reducing stress, stopping smoking and proper rest.

What can I do?

Learn more about the disease and work towards meeting self-management and lifestyle goals. Take an active role, as a partner with your physician, in treating your RA. Talk to your family doctor if you have concerns about: nutrition, exercise, support groups, stress and depression, sexual/reproductive health, financial and employment issues (pension and housing), and child care support.

Resources for people affected by rheumatoid arthritis:

- The Arthritis Society Web site: www.arthritis.ca
- Arthritis Information Line (toll free): 1 800 321-1433
- Arthritis Foundation: www.arthritis.org
- Arthritis Consumer Experts: www.arthritisconsumerexperts.org
- Find a Physical Therapist: www.bcphysio.org or 1 888 736-5645
- Dial-A-Dietitian Nutrition Information Society: www.dialadietitian.org or 1 800 667-3438
- Search for an occupational therapist in BC by name, professional interest or workplace: www.bcsot.org
- B.C. Chronic Disease Management Web site provides patient information and resources on common chronic illnesses: <http://www.health.gov.bc.ca/cdm/patients/index.html>
- BC NurseLine for advice and information any time of day or night at:
604 215-4700 (Greater Vancouver)
1 866 215-4700 (toll free) if outside the lower Mainland
1 866 TTY-4700 deaf and hearing-impaired (toll-free province-wide)
- To see patient guides for other chronic conditions and the physician's guideline for rheumatoid arthritis, visit the Guidelines and Protocols Web Site at www.health.gov.bc.ca/msp/protoguides/gps/
- *BC HealthGuide Handbook* available at www.bchealthguide.org
- Buy from a bookstore or borrow from the library *The Arthritis Helpbook: A Tested Self-Management Program for Coping with Arthritis and Fibromyalgia* by Kate Lorig and James Fries, published by Da Capo Press. Several editions are available, with information on the 2006 edition at: http://www.perseusbooks.com/perseus/book_detail_redirect.do?imprintCid=DC&isbn=0738210382