

# Rheumatoid Facts



## What rheumatoid arthritis is:

RA is a chronic disease that causes pain, stiffness, swelling, and limitation in the motion and function of multiple joints. Though joints are the principal body parts affected by RA, inflammation can develop in other organs as well.

The stiffness seen in active RA is typically worst in the morning and may last anywhere from one to two hours to the entire day. This long period of morning stiffness is an important diagnostic clue, as not many other arthritic diseases behave this way. For example, osteoarthritis does not generally cause prolonged morning stiffness. While RA can affect any joint, the small joints in the hands and feet tend to be involved more frequently than others. This produces a pattern of joint disease that rheumatologists regard as characteristic of RA.

Other symptoms that can occur in RA include:

- loss of energy
- low-grade fevers
- loss of appetite
- dry eyes and mouth from an associated condition known as Sjogren's syndrome
- firm lumps called rheumatoid nodules beneath the skin in areas such as the elbow and hands

## What causes rheumatoid arthritis:

RA is classified as an autoimmune disease, which develops because certain cells of the immune system malfunction and attack healthy joints. While the cause of RA remains unknown, exciting and rapidly advancing research is revealing the factors that are important in producing inflammation. The primary

focus of the inflammation is in the synovium, which is the lining tissue of the joint. Inflammatory chemicals released by the immune cells cause swelling and damage to cartilage and bone. This research is giving us a better understanding of the immune and genetic factors that may be involved in the disease. As a result of this work, new medications have been developed that specifically block certain signals in the body from the immune system that are important in causing RA symptoms and joint damage. Medications have been developed that specifically block certain



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Rheumatoid arthritis is a chronic disorder for which there is no known cure. It therefore requires a comprehensive program that combines medical, social, and emotional support for the patient. It is essential that the patient and the patient's family be educated about the nature and course of the disease. The major goals of treatment of the arthritis are to reduce pain and discomfort, prevent deformities and loss of joint function, and maintain a productive and active life. Inflammation must be suppressed and mechanical and structural abnormalities corrected or compensated by assistive devices. Treatment options include reduction of joint stress, physical and occupational therapy, drug therapy, and surgical intervention.

### Who gets rheumatoid arthritis

RA is the most common form of inflammatory arthritis. More than 2 million Americans suffer from RA. About 75 percent of those affected are women, and 1–3% of women may develop rheumatoid arthritis in their lifetime. The disease most often begins between the fourth and sixth decades of life; however, RA can develop at any age.

### Broader health impact of rheumatoid arthritis

Recent research indicates that people with RA, particularly those whose disease is not well controlled, may have a higher risk for heart disease and stroke. Talk with your physician about your own risk and ways that you can minimize it.

### Points to Remember

- RA has been a primary focus of rheumatologic research and the treatments now available have dramatically improved outcomes for patients. Joint pain and swelling can usually be well controlled and joint damage can be minimized by early treatment.
- Expertise is particularly needed to establish a diagnosis of RA early, to rule out diseases that mimic RA (thereby avoiding unnecessary testing, drug therapy and costs) and to design a treatment plan that is best suited and customized for the patient and addresses the need for and the risks and benefits of DMARD therapy. Accordingly, the rheumatologist, working with the primary care physician and other health care providers, should play the major role in outlining, implementing and supervising the management of the patient with RA.
- Studies have shown that people who receive early treatment of RA feel better, are more likely to be able to lead an active life, and are less likely to experience the type of joint damage that leads to joint replacement.

### The rheumatologist's role in the treatment of rheumatoid arthritis

RA is a complex disease, but many advances in treatment have been made recently. Rheumatologists are specialists in musculoskeletal disorders and therefore are more likely to make a proper diagnosis. They can also advise patients about the best treatment options available.

*For more information, contact a Texas Tech Physician Rheumatologist at 743-3150.*



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