

**Rheumatology**

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Clinician Review

**Rheumatoid arthritis  
in 5 minutes**





## **What Is Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA)?**

Rheumatoid arthritis, or RA, is a long-term autoimmune disease.

It causes the immune system to mistakenly attack the body's own joints.

Key idea: RA is not just “wear and tear” arthritis—it is inflammation driven by the immune system.



## How RA Affects the Body

- RA mainly affects the lining of the joints, especially:
  - Hands and wrists
  - Feet and ankles
  - Knees and elbows
- Over time, this inflammation can cause:
  - Pain and swelling
  - Stiffness
  - Joint damage if untreated
- RA can also affect fatigue, eyes, lungs, heart, and overall health.



## Common Symptoms

People with RA often notice:

- Joint pain and swelling on both sides of the body
- Morning stiffness lasting longer than 30–60 minutes
- Fatigue or low energy
- Warm or tender joints

Symptoms may flare up and then improve for a while.



## Who Gets RA?

RA can affect anyone (0.5-1% of the population), but:

- It is more common in women (2:1)
- Often begins between ages 30–60
- Family history can increase risk
- Lifestyle factors like smoking can worsen risk and severity.



## How RA Is Diagnosed

There is no single test for RA. Doctors use:

- Medical history and physical exam
- Blood tests that look for inflammation or immune markers
- Imaging like X-rays or ultrasound

Early diagnosis is important to prevent joint damage (Destructive joint changes may appear early in the disease course, with nearly half of patients diagnosed with RA showing radiographic evidence of bone erosions within the first year of disease in some reports)



## How RA Is Treated

There is no cure, but RA is very treatable.

Treatment goals:

- Reduce inflammation
- Control pain and stiffness
- Protect joints and function

Common treatments include:

- Anti-inflammatory medications
- Immune-targeting drugs
- Physical activity and joint protection



## **Living Well With RA**

Many people with RA live full, active lives.

Helpful strategies:

- Taking medications as prescribed
- Staying physically active
- Managing stress and fatigue
- Regular follow-up care

Early and ongoing treatment makes a big difference.



## **Key Takeaways**

- RA is an autoimmune inflammatory disease
- It affects joints and sometimes other organs
- Early treatment helps prevent damage
- With modern care, most people do well
- RA is manageable—and help is available.