



PAINFUL JOINTS?

Early Treatment for Rheumatoid Arthritis Is Key

Painful, swollen, and stiff joints can be a sign of arthritis. Rheumatoid arthritis is one of the most common forms. The pain and stiffness can interfere with your life at home and at work. For some people, the disease is mild, but for others it can be disabling. Scientists continue to search for the cause of this disease and for ways to improve treatment.

Arthritis is an inflammation of the joints. There are over 100 types of arthritis. While their symptoms can be similar, their underlying causes vary. Osteoarthritis is the most common type of arthritis. It's far more common than rheumatoid arthritis. Osteoarthritis is caused by wear and tear on your joints. In rheumatoid arthritis, your immune system—which normally helps protect your body from infection and disease—starts attacking your joint tissues.

Anyone can get rheumatoid arthritis. The disease most often begins in middle age or later. But it can occur at any age. Even children sometimes get a similar form of arthritis. Some types of arthritis affect one joint at a time,

but rheumatoid arthritis can affect your whole body.

It's important to get the correct diagnosis because each form of arthritis needs to be treated differently. To diagnose rheumatoid arthritis, doctors use medical history, physical exams, X-rays, and lab tests. There's no single test for the disease. It's not easy to diagnose.

SYMPTOMS

Your joints may appear red and feel warm. Pain and stiffness may be worse after you wake up or have been resting for a long time. Over time, your immune system damages the tough, flexible tissue (cartilage) that lines joints. This damage can be severe and deform your joints.

Research advances have improved patient outcomes in the past 10 to 20 years. Doctors no longer wait to start treating a person with rheumatoid arthritis. Now, they know to begin treatment right away—before joint damage worsens.

Early detection is very important to increase the chance that treatment is successful.

“If we can get you into low disease activity by 6 months and remission [no signs of the disease] by 1 year, we’ve got an incredibly good chance of the disease having a very minimal impact on your life,” says Dr. Vivian P. Bykerk, an NIH-funded arthritis researcher at the Hospital for Special Surgery in New York.

TREATMENTS

There are many different classes of drugs available. Many of the drugs, like NSAIDs (nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs) and steroids, work by reducing inflammation. Such drugs may be used in combination with others that have been shown to slow joint destruction.

“We really have to rely on our experience. We consider the combination of signs, symptoms, and blood tests to choose the right treatment,” Bykerk explains. Once treatment for rheumatoid arthritis is underway, patients need frequent checkups. Doctors may need to try and adjust different drugs or drug combinations to find the best fit for each person. Treatments are usually required for the long term to maintain control of the disease. For some people, symptoms go on for years, even a lifetime. Sometimes after months of mild disease, symptoms can flare up again.

Rheumatoid arthritis can affect virtually every area of your life, from work to relationships. If you have rheumatoid arthritis, there are many things you can do to help maintain your lifestyle and keep a positive outlook. Exercise helps keep your muscles healthy and strong, preserve joint mobility, and maintain flexibility. Rest helps to reduce joint inflammation, pain, and fatigue. Ask your doctor how best to balance exercise and rest for your situation.

ARTHRITIS TIPS

- » **Don’t smoke.** Smoking increases the risk of getting rheumatoid arthritis.
- » **Be active.** Walking, swimming, and other forms of physical activity help to reduce pain and stiffness.
- » **Rest.** Taking breaks from activity helps to reduce active joint inflammation and pain, and to fight fatigue.
- » **Take your medicine.** Follow your doctor’s instructions for taking pain relievers and other medicines.
- » **Use heat or cold.** You can use either heating pads or cold therapy to reduce pain.
- » **Find a support group.** You may find it helpful to talk to other people about how they cope with the disease.

