

Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA) of the Hand



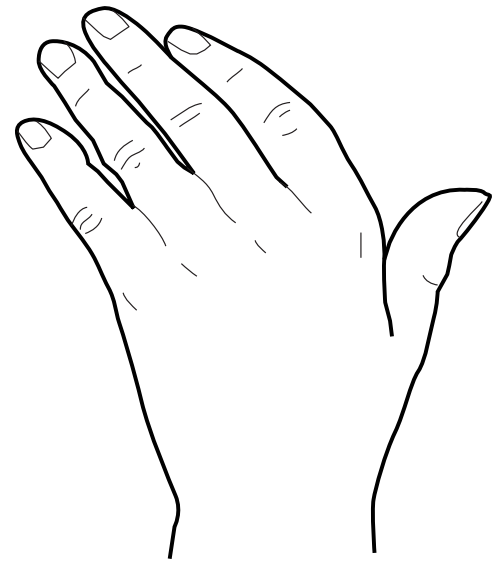
THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY
WEXNER MEDICAL CENTER

Rheumatoid arthritis, sometimes called RA, is a chronic disease that affects the whole body.

It is an autoimmune disease. The body's immune system does not operate as it should and attacks healthy joint tissues. This causes inflammation of the membrane or tissues lining the joints. The inflammation causes pain, stiffness, warmth, redness, and swelling.

Over time the joint's tissues and cartilage break down and cause bone to wear away. In many cases, other tissues and body organs can also be affected.

The joints in the lower and middle knuckles of the fingers and the wrist are those most often affected in the hand.



Signs

With RA and other types of arthritis, stiffness, swelling, and pain are common signs. Other signs include:

- Clicks or creaking sounds with joint movement
- Fingers bend away from the thumb
- Loss of ability to straighten or bend fingers or the thumb
- Weakness in joints of fingers and wrist
- Deformity of middle and end joints of fingers

Cause of RA

The cause is not known. Viruses may trigger the disease in people who have a family history or genetic marker with RA. Most people with this disease have an antibody found in the blood, called rheumatoid factor.

Your doctor will diagnose the disease based on the pattern of your signs, your medical history, an exam, and lab tests.

Treatment

Treatment is often through a team approach. You will work with your family doctor and others as the disease progresses. Your team may include:

- Rheumatologist, a doctor with special training in arthritis
- Nurse
- Physical therapist (PT)
- Occupational therapist (OT)

- Orthopedic surgeon, a doctor who does surgery on bone and joint injuries
- Psychologist to help you cope with stress and progression of the disease
- Social worker to help find resources to assist you with lifestyle needs

The goal is to reduce swelling, relieve pain and stiffness, slow down or stop joint damage, and improve function and well-being. Treatment may include:

- Medicines to control joint swelling and pain
- Hot or cold packs
- Water therapy
- Exercise
- Rest
- Joint protection with splints or assistive devices
- Physical and occupational therapy to develop a program to best meet your needs for exercise and daily activities

Surgery may be needed for joints that are damaged and painful. Surgery can ease pain, correct deformities, and improve function. Your doctor will talk to you about what surgery may be best for you.

Rheumatoid arthritis is a chronic disease that cannot be cured, but it can be controlled. Work with your health care team to manage your disease.

Living with rheumatoid arthritis

Educate yourself about the disease and take part in your care:

- Learn about the disease.
- Work with your doctor to manage pain.
- Learn how to cope with arthritis to stay active.
- Know that you are not alone. Support groups can help.

For information and programs to help you manage your arthritis, check out these websites:

- The Arthritis Foundation at www.arthritis.org
- The National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases within the National Institutes of Health at www.niams.nih.gov

You might also want to check your library for self-help books and brochures or magazines, like Arthritis Today.

Talk to your doctor or health care team if you have any questions about your care.

For more health information, contact the Library for Health Information at **614-293-3707** or e-mail **health-info@osu.edu**.