About Rheumatoid Arthritis

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is an autoimmune disorder that causes inflammation in the body leading to pain, chronic swelling and stiffness. Many people report feeling ill or tired as RA often affects the entire body. The immune system attacks healthy small joint tissues causing swelling in the membrane or tissues lining the joints. Over time, joint tissue and cartilage (spongy cushion between joints) can break down and wear away.

Risk

More than 2 million Americans have RA. The risk increases if you are a woman, or between 30 and 60 years of age. If you have a family history of arthritis or autoimmune disorders, this can also increase your risk. A blood test can be used to check for a genetic marker, called rheumatoid factor, for RA.

Signs of Rheumatoid Arthritis

Common signs of RA include:

- Chronic pain and stiffness
- Redness and warmth around joints
- Feeling sick and tired (fatigue)
- Joint swelling and enlargement
- Muscle or joint weakness or limited use of joints
- Rheumatoid nodules or lumps can form under the skin

Signs can last more than 30 minutes in the morning or after being at rest. Flare ups and then periods of time with less pain are common. Signs often start in the hands, wrists, arms, and shoulders, or hips, knees, ankles and feet. Rheumatoid nodules may form under the skin in areas with excess pressure, such as the back of the elbows. Disease progression may cause problems with the lungs, blood vessels, heart and eyes.

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Learn more about your health care.
Testing
After a physical exam, tests may be ordered to check your health, such as:
- Blood test to check for rheumatoid factor
- X-rays or magnetic resonance imaging (MRI)
- Joint fluid analysis where a small sample of fluid around the painful joint is removed.

Treatment
Treatment is used to reduce your signs, including slowing down joint damage, and improving overall function. A Rheumatology doctor with special training in RA is often best to manage your care.
- Medicines: Medicines are used to control joint swelling and pain
- Pain Control: Rest, as well as heat, cold therapy or water therapy.
- Physical and occupational therapy: Physical and occupational therapists will develop a special plan for you. This may include different type of exercise.
- Medical equipment: Splits, braces and assistive devices can be helpful.
- Dietitians: Help with nutrition or dietary supplements can improve weight control and signs associated with RA.
- Surgery: This may be needed to repair, replace or stabilize the joint.

Living with Rheumatoid Arthritis
Take part in your care to better understand the disease, reduce pain and have a better quality of life. Support groups can help you with coping strategies. These organizations also provide information and programs:
- 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
- American Chronic Pain Association at www.theacpa.org

Talk to your doctor or others on your health care team if you have any questions. You may request more written information from the Library for Health Information at (614) 293-3707 or email: health-info@osu.edu.