



Rheumatoid Arthritis: A Guide for Adult Patients

► What is Rheumatoid Arthritis?

Arthritis is a word to describe when people have pain and inflammation in their joints. There are over 100 different types of arthritis. There are 2 main types - inflammatory and non-inflammatory. Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA) is the most common type of inflammatory arthritis. When a joint is inflamed it is painful, swollen, hot and stiff.

This inflammation, if not controlled, will cause permanent damage to the bone and cartilage in the joints. About 1 out of every 100 Canadians has RA. Anyone can get RA at any age, but it most often appears between ages 25 and 50. RA affects women 3 times more often than men.

► What is the Cause of Rheumatoid Arthritis?

The cause of RA is not yet known. People who develop RA have genes (DNA) that “set them up” to get the disease. Something triggers the person’s immune system to react in an abnormal way. This produces inflammation in the lining of the joints. We don’t know what the trigger is that starts RA, but a viral infection or something else in our environment is thought to be the most likely.

► How Do I Know if I Have Rheumatoid Arthritis?

When RA starts it may be sudden or gradual. The pain or stiffness with swelling in joints is usually worse in the morning. Any joint may be involved but it often starts in the fingers, wrists and feet. RA usually happens in many joints but at the start there may be pain/stiffness in only one or two joints. Your doctor will look for clues that suggest the joint inflammation is RA and not another type of arthritis. Blood tests help give clues but there is no blood test to completely diagnose RA. It often takes months to confirm a diagnosis of RA.

► What Treatments Are Available?

If your family doctor believes that you have RA, it is important to see a rheumatologist and to begin treatment as soon as possible. Medications can control most of the joint inflammation. There is no cure at this time but damage from RA can be kept to as little as possible. It is important to start medications early and your doctor will discuss these with you. It is also important to remember that these medications may cause side effects, but the medications are worth taking to prevent permanent joint damage.

Regular exercise is important. With painful joints you may need to see a physical therapist. You will learn how to exercise inflamed joints safely and how to stay fit. An occupational therapist can advise you how to reduce stress to your joints while continuing your daily activities.

► What Can I Do?

Learn more about the disease and work towards meeting goals for improved lifestyle such as a healthy diet, weight control, reducing stress, stopping smoking and proper rest.

Talk to your family doctor if you have concerns about: nutrition, exercise, support groups, stress and depression, sexual/reproductive health, financial and employment issues (pension and housing), and child care support.

► **Resources for people with Rheumatoid Arthritis:**

- The Arthritis Society website: www.arthritis.ca
- Arthritis Information Line (toll free): 1-800-321-1433
- Arthritis Foundation: www.arthritis.org
- Arthritis Consumer Experts: www.jointhehealth.org
- Find a Physical Therapist: www.bcphysio.org
- Rheuminfo - rheumatology resource for patients and physicians www.rheuminfo.com
- BC Health and Seniors Information Line 1-800-465-4911, Victoria 250-952-1742 and website www.seniorsbc.ca
- HealthlinkBC – Health information, translation services and dieticians, www.healthlinkbc.ca or by telephone 811.
- Search for an occupational therapist in BC by name, professional interest or workplace: www.bcsot.org
- To see patient guides for other chronic conditions and the physician’s guideline for Rheumatoid Arthritis, visit the BC Guidelines web site at www.bcguidelines.ca