



COPING WITH RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS



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OVERVIEW

People have long feared rheumatoid arthritis (RA) as one of the most disabling types of arthritis.¹ The good news is that the outlook has greatly improved for many people with newly diagnosed RA.¹ Treatment strategies allow most people with RA to lead productive lives.²

Although healthcare professionals prescribe treatments to help patients manage their rheumatoid arthritis, the real key to living well with the disease lies with the patients themselves. Self-care can help people:

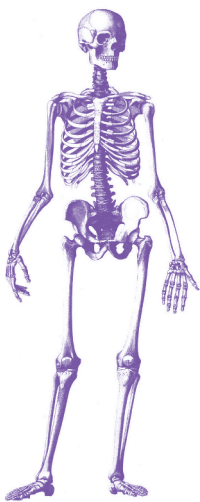
- Understand the disease
- Reduce their pain while remaining active
- Cope physically, emotionally, and mentally
- Feel greater control over the disease and build a sense of confidence in the ability to function and lead full, active, and independent lives.

This patient leaflet describes the importance of self-care in helping patients manage and cope with the challenges of living with RA.

WHAT IS RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS?

Rheumatoid arthritis is an inflammatory disease that causes pain, swelling, stiffness and loss of function in the joints.² It occurs when the immune system starts attacking healthy tissues.² While RA can affect any joint, the small joints in the hands and feet tend to be involved most often.¹ Inflammation can affect organs as well, such as the eyes or lungs.¹

RA has several features that make it different from other kinds of arthritis.² For example, rheumatoid arthritis usually occurs in a symmetrical pattern, meaning that if one knee or hand is involved, it is highly likely that the other one is as well.² In addition, people with RA may have fatigue, occasional fevers and a loss of energy.²



Rheumatoid arthritis usually affects joints symmetrically (on both sides equally), may initially begin in a couple of joints only, and most frequently attacks the wrists, hands, elbows, shoulders, knees and ankles²

Adapted from: <http://pennstatehershey.adam.com/content.aspx?productid=10&pid=10&qid=000048>



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TREATMENT OF RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS

Treatment plays a key role in controlling the inflammation of rheumatoid arthritis and in minimising joint damage.³ Treatment usually includes a combination of medication and non-drug therapies.³

The goals of treatment are to:³

- Lessen symptoms
- Prevent joint damage
- Maintain the person's quality of life and ability to function

Medication for early RA

Joint damage caused by RA generally occurs within the first two years of diagnosis.³ For this reason, doctors start proper medical treatment as soon as possible, before the joints have lasting damage.¹

- People diagnosed with RA should begin treatment with disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs (DMARDs), which not only relieve symptoms, but also slow the progression of the disease.¹
- Often doctors prescribe non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) and/or low dose cortisone to reduce swelling and pain.¹

SELF-CARE FOR RA

Non-drug therapies can help control symptoms, minimise joint damage and improve quality of life.³

Rest and exercise

People with rheumatoid arthritis need a good balance between rest and exercise, with more rest when the disease is active and more exercise when it is not.²

- Rest helps to reduce active joint inflammation and pain and to fight fatigue.²
- Exercise is important for maintaining healthy and strong muscles, preserving joint mobility and maintaining flexibility.² Exercise can also reduce pain, increase strength, mobility and fitness, leading to an improved ability to perform daily functions.⁴ Exercise can also help to reduce depression and anxiety in people with arthritis.⁴

Joint care

Using a splint for a short time around a painful joint reduces pain and swelling by supporting the joint and letting it rest.²

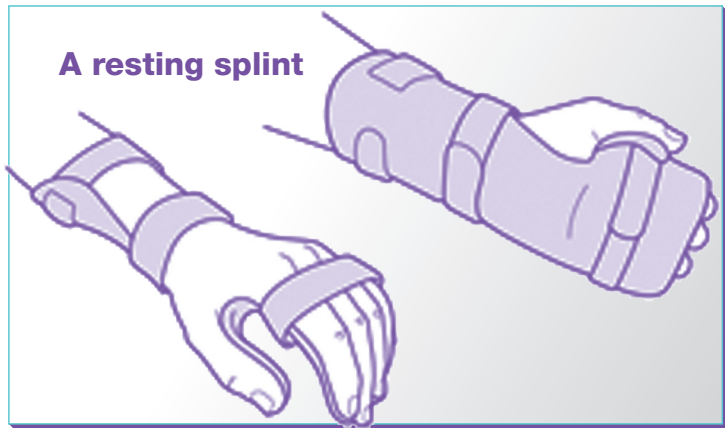
A physiotherapist or an occupational therapist can help a person choose a splint and make sure it fits properly.²



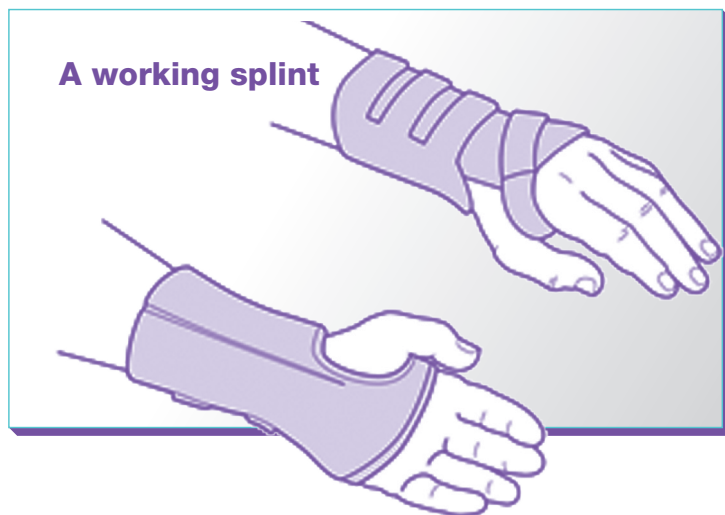
SELF-CARE FOR RA

Other ways to reduce stress of joints include self-help devices such as zip pullers, long-handled shoe horns; devices to help people get on and off chairs, toilet seats and beds.²

A resting splint



A working splint



EXERCISE AND RA

Many people with arthritis do not exercise, often because of joint or muscle pain, weakness, fatigue or joint swelling.⁴ This leads to loss of joint motion, stiffness, muscle weakness and tightness.⁴ Yet, regular exercise (i.e. on most days of the week) can reduce pain and improve quality of life for people with RA.⁴

Most people with RA can find a way to exercise without increasing their symptoms.⁴

Speak to your doctor or a physiotherapist before beginning an exercise programme.⁴

Specific questions to ask about exercising include:⁴

- Are there any specific exercises or movements that I should avoid? For example, people with inflamed joints may be told to do range-of-motion exercises only.⁴



EXERCISE AND RA

- Are there any specific exercises that should be included? For example, people with RA benefit from regular hand and wrist exercises to maintain range of motion and function.



1. Straighten Fingers



2. Knuckle Bend w/ Straight Fingers



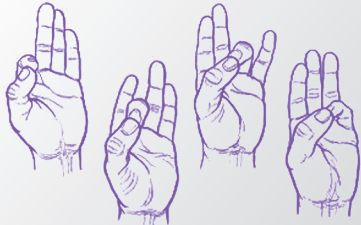
3. Karate Chop (90/90 position)



4. Closed Fist



5. Open & Closed Fingers



6. Thumb to Finger Touch Finish at Palm Crease

Adapted from: <https://www.google.co.za/imgres?imgurl=https%3A%2F%2F149.28.107.208%2Fwp-content%2Fuploads%2F2018%2F06%2Fhand-exercises-for-rheumatoid-arthritis-with-pictures.jpg&imgrefurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.climwatadapt.eu%2Farthritis-climw%2Farthritis-spine-treatment-exercises-rheumatoid-pics%2F&tbid=gUwoHqWoQb5MRM&vet=10CGUQMygvahcKEwjY7r2P5szqAhUAAAAHQAAAAAQBQ...i&docid=WTNknDsawAvHvM&w=640&h=480&q=range%20of%20motion%20exercises%20hand%20fingers%20arthritis&ved=0CGUQMygvahcKEwjY7r2P5szqAhUAAAAHQAAAAAQBQ>



PREPARING FOR EXERCISE

Pain, stiffness and fatigue are barriers to exercise for many people with arthritis.⁴ Preparing for exercise can minimise these concerns.⁴

- Some people benefit from a warm shower before exercising.⁴
- Cardiovascular warm-ups and cool-downs are recommended for all people before exercising.⁴

Warm-up Exercise⁴	Cool-down⁴
<p>10-15 minute warm-up e.g.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Walk, swim or cycle at half normal speed• Do range-of-motion exercises starting at the head and neck and progressing to the feet and ankles	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Slow down your walking, swimming or cycling gradually• Do range-of-motion exercises• Do stretching exercises



PREPARING FOR EXERCISE

Range-of-motion exercises



PROTECT THE JOINTS

People with arthritis need to take a few extra precautions to protect their joints while exercising:⁴

- Start slowly and increase activity gradually.
- Avoid jarring movements and high-impact activities like running.
- Walk on flat, level surfaces, especially if prone to hip, knee, foot or ankle problems.
- Wear shoes that support the arches and provide cushioning.
- Monitor for pain during exercise.
- Do not take excess pain medication before exercise as this can mask pain during exercise.

Morning stiffness related to RA often improves after performing stretching exercises, taking a warm shower and/or using warm-up exercises⁴





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References:

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4. Gecht-Silver MR, Duncombe AM. Patient education: Arthritis and exercise (Beyond the Basics). c2020. (Online) Available from https://www.uptodate.com/contents/arthritis-and-exercise-beyond-the-basics?source=see_link Accessed 09/07/2020.