

What is Rheumatoid Arthritis?

Rheumatoid arthritis is an autoimmune disease. It is caused by your own immune system attacking your own tissue like joints. It causes pain and swelling of the joints. It can affect the small joints of the hand and feet as well as the larger joints like hips, knees, shoulders. It is more common in females. It most commonly occurs between 30-50 years.

What are the symptoms of Rheumatoid Arthritis?

- Pain and swelling of the joints
- Stiffness especially early in the morning and >30 minutes
- Can start in one or two joints and slowly affect other joints.
- Fatigue.
- Can also affect other parts of the body like eyes, lungs, heart, blood vessels and patients may have different symptoms depending on organ involvement like dry eyes, cough, nodules.

Causes of Rheumatoid Arthritis:

Rheumatoid arthritis is an auto immune condition. In autoimmune conditions your immune system makes abnormal antibodies (soldier cells) which mistake its own body as foreign and attacks it. It causes an inflammatory response which initially causes swelling of joints but if not treated it destroys the cartilage and bones and leads to irreversible damage on the joint. There are certain genes which increase risks of autoimmune conditions and these conditions may run in families. Smoking increases the risk of rheumatoid arthritis and causes a more destructive disease. Other environmental factors like infection agents may also trigger rheumatoid arthritis. Hormonal changes may also be a cause and often patients can present just after pregnancy or at times of hormonal changes.

How is Rheumatoid Arthritis diagnosed?

Rheumatoid arthritis is diagnosed by symptoms and physical examination. Blood tests can assist in diagnosis.

Blood tests (Rheumatoid Factor, ACCP antibody)

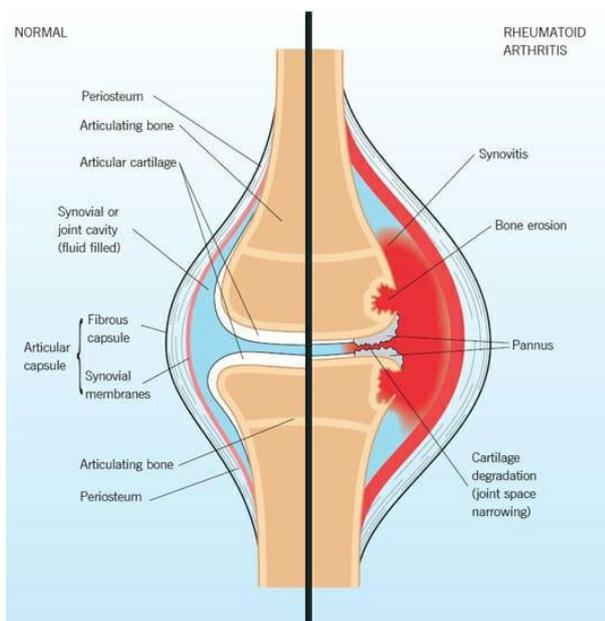
A negative blood test for Rheumatoid factor (RF)/ ACCP does not exclude a diagnosis of rheumatoid arthritis. X-rays can help with diagnosis in patients who have damaged joints but do not help in the early stages of rheumatoid arthritis. Inflammatory markers like CRP \ ESR may be elevated. Patients may also have anaemia.

If your rheumatoid factor or anti-ccp is negative, this does not mean you can't have RA.

Ultrasound of joints is also helpful in diagnosing Rheumatoid arthritis.

What does Rheumatoid Arthritis do to the joints?

Initially patients start with pain, swelling and stiffness of joints.



Our immune system makes abnormal antibodies which trigger inflammation (swelling in joints). This results in pain, swelling of joints. Overtime the inflammatory cells destroy the cartilage, bone and tendons. This leads to deformation of joints.

Although early on pain is the predominant symptom, as the joint is damaged we lose function of the joint.

Early treatment of rheumatoid arthritis is important.

It is important to treat rheumatoid arthritis as early and aggressively best possible. If we can stop inflammation early we can prevent the destruction of joints. We can also reduce the risk of other conditions which are increased with inflammation like diseases of the heart. With early treatment and better availability of drugs to treat rheumatoid arthritis if we treat patients appropriately they can continue leading normal lives.

STAGES OF RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS



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How do we treat Rheumatoid Arthritis?

Treatment of rheumatoid arthritis is best managed by your rheumatologist together with other specialists as needed. Treatment must be tailored to each individual. A treat to target approach should be used. Our target being remission or low disease activity as well as preventing side effects and controlling co-morbidities. We aim to keep the patient functional. We will also regularly monitor patient to prevent side effects from drugs.

Whenever we treat an autoimmune condition our aim is to stop the abnormal immune system without affecting the normal immune system. Each individual has a unique immune system and not all people will respond to exactly the same medication.

The medication we use to treat rheumatoid arthritis are called disease modifying agents (DMARDs) or biological treatments.

When your doctor chooses your treatment they will discuss the benefits versus side effects of the medication.

Not treating the disease will lead to deformities and decrease function as well as increase risk of death.

Patients using medication for rheumatoid arthritis should regularly follow up with their rheumatologist. You will have to do blood tests and eye checks as advised by your doctor.

Besides specific rheumatoid arthritis medication we also use Vitamin D and calcium for bone protection, to prevent osteoporosis.

We also use medication for pain like analgesics and non steroidal anti inflammatory NSAIDs.

Corticosteroids in low doses as well as intra articular steroids may also be used especially early on in treatment.

DMARDs

Methotrexate

Chloroquine

Salazopyren

Leflunomide

For details and side effects of drugs refer to medication info.

Biologics

These medication are targeted molecules that act on specific parts off the immune system which are directly responsible for the destructive effects. They are costly treatments and can increase the risk of infections. Biologic treatments are not used as first line therapy in South Africa

Biologics in rheumatoid arthritis

Anti TNF Alpha inhibitors such as Adalimumab or Humira, Etanercept or Enbrel, Golimumab or Simponi and Infliximab or Revellex

Abatacept or Orencia

IL6 inhibitors like Tocilizumab or Actemra

B-cell depletion like Rituximab or Mabthera

Bio-similar drugs may also soon be available in South Africa.

Small molecules

JAK kinase inhibitors will soon be registered for use in South Africa.

For information on drugs please see medical drug info

Besides medication patients need to be kept functional. Living with a chronic disease can be difficult and patients need to be educated. Patients with rheumatoid arthritis need a multidisciplinary approach including doctors, physiotherapist or biokineticist, occupational therapist, podiatrist an even psychologist.

Exercise

It is important to exercise to maintain flexibility as well as strengthen muscles We need to focus on articular mobility exercises to remain mobile and relief stiffness.

Muscle strengthening and aerobic exercises are also beneficial. Swimming is one of the best type of exercises

Patient should also do balance awareness exercises.

Listen to your body. If you feel tired you need to rest. Choose a sport that will not result in joint injuries like soccer and rugby

What can patients do for themselves with rheumatoid arthritis

Stop smoking

Exercise

Keep ideal weight to decrease stress on joints.

Use good supportive footwear.

If you need to use assistive devices like bottle openers etc to avoid strain on your joints.

Avoid situations that increase risk of infections as your immune system is suppressed.

Make sure all your immunizations are up to date

You cannot take live vaccines like yellow fever vaccine

Take your yearly flu vaccines

You do not need to stay in pain. Take pain medication to treat your pain. When you are in pain you cannot exercise adequately which is more harmful for you.

Discuss your pain management with your doctor.

A healthy diet is necessary but will not cure your arthritis. Certain foods especially foods with sugar are pro inflammatory and may worsen your pain. Foods containing Omega 3 fish oils can help with joints. Some foods can increase your side effects with medication and should be avoided. Alcohol can also increase side effects to drugs.

If you're planning on having a family please discuss with your rheumatologist. Certain drugs cannot be used if you planning to be pregnant or breastfeed. Always discuss the treatment options with your doctor.

Comorbidities in rheumatoid arthritis

Cardiovascular -there's an increase risk of heart attacks. Also increase risk of high blood pressure. Cholesterol may also be elevated

Secondary osteoarthritis

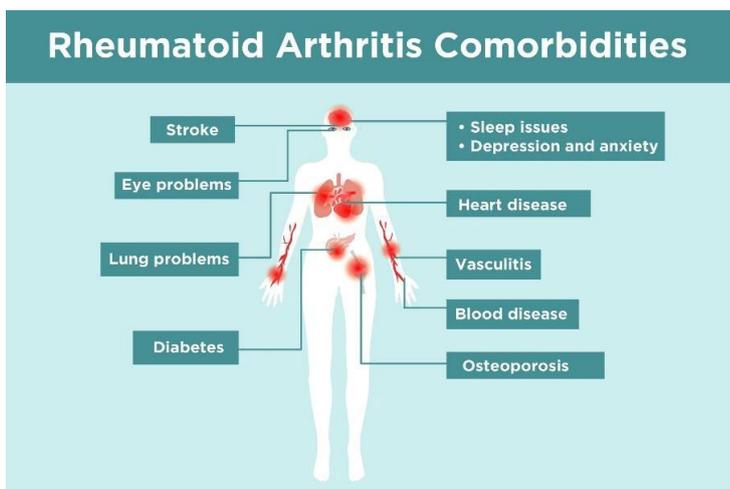
Osteoporosis

Depression

Gastrointestinal bleeds

Renal toxicities

Comorbidities may be increased due to the disease itself but also due to certain medication



Remember that rheumatoid arthritis can be treated and always feel free to discuss you treatments with you treating doctor. You did not choose to have a disease. It is not your fault.

Reliable websites

Arthritis Foundation of South Africa

Uptodate for patients

Medscape

Rheuminfo

Mayo clinic