

# Rheumatoid Arthritis & You

## What is it?



Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is a chronic (long-term) condition that causes pain, swelling, and stiffness in the joints. It is one of the most common types of inflammatory arthritis. The body's immune system becomes confused and starts to attack the joints, causing inflammation.

The word inflammation comes from the Latin word *inflammare* which means to light on fire. In people with RA, inflammation causes the joints to become warm, swollen, and painful. The joints can feel like they're "on fire." Unfortunately, we don't yet know why the immune system does this or what triggers it.

Now is probably the best time in history to get RA. The approach to treatment has changed and the medicines available today are much more effective than in the past. Research has shown us if you treat RA early you are much more likely to get into remission. Even a few months can make a difference. It is important to get that fire put out as quickly as possible.



**RA is a fire in your joints caused by inflammation. Putting out the fire early prevents damage to your body.**

Imagine you are sitting in your living room enjoying a nice cup of coffee. You look over to the kitchen and see a fire burning on the stove. What do you think you'll do? One option is to just sit there and wait until the fire gets worse and spreads to the walls or the ceiling. The second option is to grab the phone, dial

## What is it going to do to me?



RA usually starts slowly and affects only a few joints. It might start in a knee, a wrist, the hands, or even the feet and over time it can start to affect other joints. Sometimes RA seems to come on overnight or other times it seems to jump around from joint to joint.

For people with RA, the worst time is usually the morning when the joints feel stiff and sore. Morning stiffness or stiffness after periods of rest is very common with RA. This stiffness usually lasts more than 30 to 60 minutes before loosening up. Tiredness and fatigue are also very common with RA.

One thing to remember about RA and other types of inflammatory arthritis is that chronic (long-term) inflammation is not good for the body. Chronic swelling in a joint can cause permanent damage. We also now know that having RA or other types of inflammatory arthritis is linked to heart disease. That means people with RA have a higher chance of developing heart disease than people without RA.

the fire department, and grab the fire extinguisher. You can think of RA like a fire in your joints. You want to get that fire put out as quickly as possible so it doesn't damage your body. Once the damage from RA is done it cannot be reversed. We want to stop RA before it damages your joints.

## What can I do about it?



The first thing you should do is to make sure your arthritis is treated. If you have RA or think you may have RA, your family doctor should refer you to a rheumatologist. A rheumatologist is a specialist doctor who is an expert in treating arthritis. This type of doctor is in the best position to help you manage your condition.

It is important to treat RA with medications that control the symptoms **and** prevent long-term damage. These medications fall into two categories:

1. **Disease Modifying Anti-Rheumatic Drugs (DMARDs)**
2. **Biologics**

If you've got RA you **should** be taking DMARDs and/or biologics.

Make sure you do everything you can to reduce your risk of heart disease. Keep your blood pressure and cholesterol at healthy levels. If you have diabetes, keep your blood sugar under control. If you are a smoker, quitting can improve your condition and can be one of the best things you can do for your overall health. Here are some other recommendations on what you should do:

- **Learn as much as you can about the disease**
- **See your rheumatologist regularly**
- **Get your blood tests regularly as suggested by your rheumatologist**
- **Reduce your risk of heart disease**

## Visit RheumInfo.com



RheumInfo.com is a free educational website where you can learn more about RA and treatments for the disease. The website is operated by Dr. Andy Thompson, a rheumatologist.