

What is Rheumatoid Arthritis?

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is an autoimmune condition in which the immune system attacks the joint tissue causing inflammation, stiffness, pain and extreme fatigue. If left untreated, the joint can lose its shape and alignment and lead to permanent disability.

Rheumatoid arthritis can affect people of any age. Around three quarters of people with rheumatoid arthritis are first diagnosed when of working age and women are three times as likely as men to have the disease. RA is an often misunderstood disease, confused with osteoarthritis which is commonly a wear and tear disease generally affecting the older population.

690,000 people in the UK (1%) have rheumatoid arthritis costing the NHS approximately £560 million per year. The National Audit Office estimate that the total cost of RA to the UK economy is £4.8 billion per year



The National Rheumatoid Arthritis Society (NRAS) is a patient led charity, with the aim of supporting everyone living with the impact of RA and JIA at the start and at every stage of their journey. NRAS provides support, information and advocacy for people with rheumatoid arthritis and their families, friends and carers. NRAS provides a resource for health professionals and works closely with rheumatology health care professionals across the UK.

<http://www.nras.org.uk/>

What are the symptoms?

The important signs and symptoms to be aware of are:

- pain, swelling and possibly redness around your joints. Hands and feet are often affected first, though RA can start in any joint
- stiffness in your joints when you get up in the morning or after sitting for a while, which lasts for more than 30 minutes and has no other obvious cause
- fatigue that's more than just normal tiredness

<http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Rheumatoid-arthritis/Pages/Symptoms.aspx>

There may be periods where symptoms become worse, known as flare-ups or flares.

A flare can be difficult to predict, but with treatment it's possible to decrease the number of flares and minimise or prevent long-term damage to the joints.

Symptoms affecting the joints

If you have any of these symptoms, go and see your GP. The sooner RA is diagnosed and treated, the better the long-term outcomes are likely to be.

What are the causes of RA?

We know what causes inflammation in RA and [how to treat it effectively](#).

But we don't yet know exactly what causes RA itself. What we do know is that there are two elements involved: genetics and environmental factors.

Genetics are involved even if you don't have anyone in your family with RA. This has been extensively studied. But it's not all about genes, genes indicate increased risk/susceptibility but not everyone with these genes develops RA as we can see from studies of identical twins. If one identical twin has RA, the other has only a one in six chance of developing the disease, even though they have the same genes.

An **environmental trigger** can be a virus, infection, trauma of some kind, or having a very stressful episode in your life such as bereavement, divorce or childbirth. There are many theories about triggers but nothing's been conclusively identified.

Diagnosis

[How RA is diagnosed](#)

[Getting an early diagnosis](#)

Treatments

There's no cure for rheumatoid arthritis. However, early diagnosis and appropriate treatment enables many people with rheumatoid arthritis to have periods of months or even years between flares. This can help them to lead full lives and continue regular employment.

The main treatment options include:

- medication that is taken in the long-term to relieve symptoms and slow the progress of the condition
- supportive treatments, such as physiotherapy and occupational therapy, to help keep you mobile and find ways around any problems you have with daily activities
- surgery to correct any joint problems that develop

Treatment for rheumatoid arthritis can help reduce inflammation in the joints, relieve pain, prevent or slow joint damage, reduce disability and enable you to live as active a life as possible.

Although there's no cure for rheumatoid arthritis, early treatment and support – including lifestyle changes, medication, supportive treatments and surgery – can reduce the risk of joint damage and limit the impact of the condition.

Your treatment will usually involve care from your GP in addition to a number of different specialists.

Rheumatoid arthritis is a long term condition and there is no cure but there are a number of medications available that can be used to help stop rheumatoid arthritis getting worse and reduce your risk of further problems.

Treatment of the Symptoms

Pain Killers including NSAIDS (Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs) and steroids may be used to treat the symptoms of RA e.g. pain, stiffness and inflammation.

[NHS medication information](#)

Treatment of the disease

DMARDS (Disease-modifying anti-rheumatic drugs) are used to treat the underlying condition, these can be divided into non biologic or standard DMARDS and biologic DMARDS.

[Treatments for RA](#)

Monitoring your RA

What is your DAS?

A Disease Activity Score (DAS) is a measurement of rheumatoid arthritis (RA) disease activity. It is an assessment which gives you a score, rather like a blood glucose measurement in diabetes or cholesterol measurement, which tells you how well controlled your RA is and therefore reflect how well your treatment is working for you and whether any changes need to be made. The score can also be used as a treatment goal, providing you a drive towards a score of less than 2.6 which indicates disease remission.

[Disease Activity Score \(DAS\)](#)

[What does remission mean?](#)

Looking after yourself – self management

There are lots of things that you can do to help yourself to self- manage your RA and this may involve making changes and/or adapting your lifestyle. Self –management allows you to control your RA and doesn't allow your RA to control you and what you do. Self-management techniques will allow you to develop what is right for you and your RA, and will take time to learn. There are a myriad of resources, information and help available to aid you. You live with RA everyday and you are responsible for managing it in between consultant and medical appointments and there is support available to you.

[living with RA](#)

[Lifestyle information](#)

[Daily Life](#)

- **Keep a healthy weight**

If you're overweight it puts an undue stress on your weight-bearing joints, so losing weight is really important. The biologic drugs also work better in people who are not overweight.

[Diet and RA](#)

[Why is keeping a healthy weight important?](#)

- **Reduce your cholesterol**

People with RA can have an increased risk of heart disease and strokes in later life. So it's all the more important to follow a good, balanced diet and one that reduces your cholesterol level.

- **Stop smoking**

Evidence strongly suggests that smoking may increase the risk of developing RA. Smoking may also affect the severity of rheumatoid arthritis once it does develop. [Local stop smoking services](#) are free, friendly and can massively boost your chances of quitting smoking. Find information on your local service here [Stop Smoking Services](#)

[Smoking and RA](#)

- **Keep your vaccinations up to date**

Talk to your GP about the vaccinations you may need if you are taking a DMARD. It is important to have the flu vaccination and pneumococcus vaccination.

[Vaccinations](#)

- **Physical activity**

It is vital to help keep your joints moving, and there's good evidence that exercise also helps to relieve pain. The only time you shouldn't exercise is when a joint is very inflamed, swollen and painful. Speak to your specialist nurse regarding appropriate exercise.

For more information about health and fitness, including local services groups that can support you click here [local services groups that can support you](#)

[Resources and information on exercise](#)

[Hydrotherapy and RA](#)

[Gardening and arthritis](#)

- **Sleep**

If you have Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA), it is highly likely that at some time you will experience fatigue. For information on fatigue click on the link below:

[Fatigue](#)

[Arthritis Uk Fatigue information](#)

- **Pacing**

If you have RA you will need to pace yourself to make sure you have enough energy for what you want to do. Tiredness and fatigue are some of the key symptoms of RA so you need to manage what you do daily. You need to ensure you do not cram everything into a good day as you will probably pay for it the following days.

- **Flare ups**

A flare can be described as an increase in symptoms related to RA such as pain, stiffness or fatigue. Flare ups can sometimes be unpredictable and usually disappear over a day or two but everyone is different. Your self-management of RA can help you manage your condition on a daily basis ensuring you are in control of it. Flares can sometimes be an indicator that the disease is not sufficiently controlled and your medication may need to be reviewed. Please contact your specialist nurse / doctor.

- **Self – management support**

NRAS run a variety of workshops and courses that will support patients from the diagnosis of RA through to living better with RA and a Rheumatoid Arthritis Self-Management Programme. These workshops and courses are free to patients and support them in their RA journey. The courses are held locally with a programme rolled out throughout the year. Patients will be offered to attend all the relevant local workshop courses to them. The first two workshops are:

1. New 2RA

This is for patients who have been diagnosed within the last six months and is an informal two hour session designed by and for people with RA. The workshop is delivered by 2 trained lay facilitators with lived experience of RA. The workshop offers the chance for patients to share their personal experience and concerns, and learn about the benefits of self-management and the difference it can make. The workshop provides the opportunity to set simple goals, ways to manage fatigue and flares.

2. Living Better with RA

This is for patients who have RA who feel that they could do more to develop their self-management of their condition. This is an informal three hour session designed by and for people with RA. The workshop is delivered by 2 trained lay facilitators with lived experience of RA. The workshop offers supported sharing of personal experiences and concerns with more in-depth information and tips on self-management. This workshop is interactive and some parts of it are on the pain/fatigue and depression links. Workplace issues are discussed and also the potential risk/ links to other medical conditions and there avoidance.

3. Rheumatoid Arthritis Self-Management Programme (RASMP)

If you are finding it hard to self-manage your RA or think you would benefit from additional support the RASMP is available for patients which have been diagnosed more than 1 year ago. The sessions are relaxed and informative and allow you to talk to others and investigate how they self-manage and helpful tips etc. The programme is delivered over 6x3 hour consecutive weekly sessions by two specially trained facilitators-one a rheumatology health professional and one lay person living with RA. The course covers a variety of topics including the nature and effects of RA together with treatments, medications with more self-management techniques.

[NRAS RASMP](#)

If you feel you would benefit from any of the workshops or courses please get in touch with your rheumatology team who can refer you to attend. All the workshops/courses are held within the MSK Central Partnership and a variety of different locations, venues and times are available. Contact MSK partnership on 0300 303 8063 or email rheum.mskpartnership@nhs.net

- **Speak to someone else with RA**

Sometimes it can be really helpful to talk to someone else who really understands what it is like to live with rheumatoid arthritis. NRAS has trained Telephone Support Volunteers all of whom have been diagnosed with RA. We can arrange for them to telephone you at a mutually convenient time about whatever aspect of your RA that concerns you most.

[Speak to someone with RA](#)

- **Health Unlocked online social network**

[NRAS Health Unlocked community](#)

HealthUnlocked is a social network for health. By finding others with similar health backgrounds people can take on day to day health concerns together. And because our communities are set up by leading health organization's people have access to credible support.

Peer-to-peer support network patients, caregivers and health advocates connect safely online with guidance from credible organizations and institutions. They talk about their experiences of conditions, symptoms, treatments, and health services. These are catalogued in an intelligent database which signposts relevant content to people based on their profile. 2.5 million experiences have been shared and many more are created every day.

[Useful links](#)