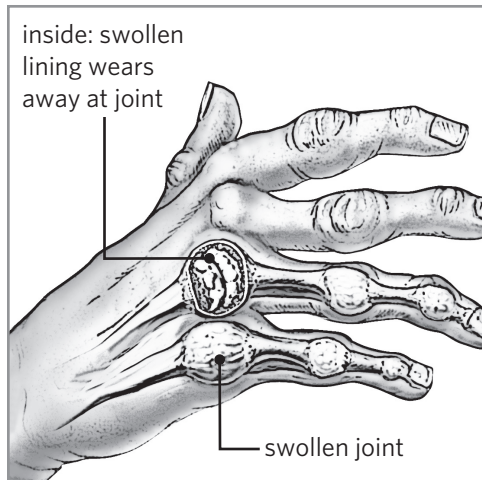


# Rheumatoid Arthritis



**Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) causes painful swelling in the lining of your joints.** It is chronic, which means you'll always have it, but your symptoms may come and go.

RA is an autoimmune disorder. This means your immune system mistakenly treats healthy tissue as harmful. RA attacks the lining of your joints and causes them to become thick, swollen, stiff and painful. Over time, the lining can begin to wear away at the joints, causing them to lose shape and the ability to move easily.

Although there is no cure for RA, there are treatments and lifestyle changes that can help improve symptoms so you live a full, active life.

## Symptoms

You'll begin to notice symptoms between ages 25 and 55. They often begin in your small joints, like your hands, wrists and feet. Over time, larger joints like your shoulders, knees and hips can also be affected.

RA symptoms vary from person to person and may come and go. If you have RA, you'll likely have some of these common signs:

- **joint pain, swelling or tenderness**, which usually happens on both sides of your body (meaning if a certain joint hurts on your left side, it will hurt on your right side as well)
- **stiffness**, often in the morning and after sitting for long periods of time
- **weakness and fatigue**
- **red, puffy hands**
- **bumps underneath the skin of your arms**, especially your elbows
- **fever and other flu-like symptoms**
- **weight loss and decrease in appetite**

See your doctor right away if you have any of these symptoms. Getting treatment early can help prevent pain and joint damage that can limit your ability to go about daily life.

## Treatment

The goals of treatment are to relieve joint pain and stiffness, stop or slow damage to your joints, and help you lead a more active life. Your doctor will recommend the treatment options that are best for you.

Medicines are the most common RA treatment. They can be over-the-counter or prescription, and your doctor may recommend more than one. Medicines can help ease pain, reduce swelling and slow damage to your joints. **Always take your medicine as prescribed, and don't stop taking your medicine without talking to your doctor, even if you start to feel better.**

You can also work with other health professionals, like an occupational therapist, who can teach you new ways to carry out daily tasks so you put less stress on your joints. For example, you may learn how to open a door by leaning into it instead of pushing with your arms. Or you may use a gripping or grabbing tool to help you pick things up if your fingers hurt.

Your doctor may suggest surgery if your RA is not controlled by medicine. Surgery can reduce pain or fix a damaged joint.



## What You Can Do

Try these tips to help manage your RA:

- **Plan ahead for activity and rest**—Plan time each day to be active and to rest. Be careful to find a balance between the two. On busy days, schedule or fit in a nap.
- **Don't smoke**—Smoking can make your symptoms worse. For help kicking the habit, visit [www.smokefree.gov](http://www.smokefree.gov).
- **Lose weight if you're overweight**—This can help ease your RA symptoms. Make a weight-loss plan with your doctor, and ask your family to join you for exercise or healthy meals.
- **Use heat and cold for pain**—Use heat to soothe tired muscles and relax stiff joints. Try taking a hot shower, soaking in warm water or using a heating pad. Opt for cold to help ease immediate pain and decrease swelling. Soak in cold water or use an ice pack.
- **Relax and relieve stress**—Stress can bring on a flare-up of RA symptoms. Find ways to relax and relieve stress like deep breathing exercises, journaling or listening to music.
- **Exercise**—Regular exercise like walking or swimming can help strengthen your muscles and bones and keep your joints flexible to prevent stiffness. Talk to your doctor before you begin a new exercise routine and start out slowly.

One of the challenges of RA is to stay active without overdoing it and making your pain worse. Listen to your body: How you feel after an activity is your best guide. If you're overly tired or feel pain for more than two hours afterward, that's a sign that you need to cut back or try a different activity next time.



To learn more, visit

**HealthyAdvice.com/RA**

You can also visit these websites:

- **Arthritis Foundation**  
[www.arthritis.org](http://www.arthritis.org)
- **Medline Plus**  
[www.medlineplus.org](http://www.medlineplus.org)

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## Remember:

- RA is chronic, but treatment and self-help techniques can help you manage it.
- Always take your RA medicine as prescribed, and don't stop taking your medicine, even if you feel better, without talking to your doctor.
- Find a balance each day between activity and rest.

