

RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS

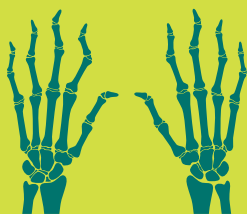
Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is a type of **inflammatory arthritis** and one of the **most common**. It is an **autoimmune disease** that most commonly affects the joints of the hands, wrists, shoulders, elbows, knees, ankles and feet.

It can affect adults of any age, but most commonly starts among people between the ages of 40 and 60. It's more common in women than men.

Symptoms of RA

There are a number of symptoms that may suggest RA, these vary from person to person. The most common include:

- **swollen and painful joints** for more than 6 weeks
- **swelling and stiffness** in joints in the morning (lasting more than 30 minutes)
- severe **tiredness** (fatigue)
- a general **feeling of being unwell** and possible loss of weight
- loss of **stamina**
- loss of **muscle** bulk
- **reduced ability** to do daily activities, eg at work, home, and leisure
- **skin lumps** (nodules), **eye dryness** or redness



Cardiovascular disease and RA

People with RA and other inflammatory joint disorders have an **increased risk of cardiovascular disease (CVD)**.

People with RA experience a 1.5- to 2-fold increased risk of coronary artery disease and twice the risk of developing heart failure compared with the general population.



Healthy lifestyle choices, including regular physical activity, are important in the management of RA to reduce the risk of CVD.



Physical activity and exercise

Physical inactivity and sedentary behaviour are more frequent in people with RA. Less than 14% of people with RA perform physical activity to the recommended levels. However, being physically active improves health outcomes and is recommended for people with RA.

Physical activity and exercise can help:

- physical **fitness** – strengthen your heart and lungs
- muscle **strength** and **endurance**
- **flexibility** and range of joint motion
- **balance**
- **pain** and **fatigue**
- **depression**
- prevent a loss of **bone density**



Types of exercise

Physical activity and exercise are important for keeping joints as mobile as possible and strengthening muscles. It can also reduce the risk of developing other diseases such as CVD, high blood pressure, osteoporosis and diabetes.

There are different types of exercises you can do that are suitable for people with RA. You should aim to do a mixture of the following:

- **mobility** exercises
- **muscle strengthening** exercises
- **aerobic** exercises (exercise that makes you breathe harder)
- **balance** exercises

Even if you can at first only manage 10 minutes at a time, it is important to start somewhere. Aim to reduce your physical inactivity and time spent sitting, and slowly increase the amount of time you are active.

Your physiotherapist can guide you in an activity programme that is right for you.

Flares

The symptoms of RA can vary from day to day. They can go from your joints feeling quite good one day, to feeling extremely painful the next, often accompanied with a significant feeling of fatigue. Experiencing an acute escalation in symptoms is called a flare.

The fear of causing a flare, or if you are experiencing a flare, can discourage physical activity and exercise. A physiotherapist will give you different exercises that you can adapt, depending on the symptoms you are experiencing.

Exercise is a key management strategy for reducing disability and improving overall health in people with RA.

A physiotherapist will be able to assess your condition, guide you how to manage your symptoms and on exercises that are right for you, and how to start increasing your physical activity safely.



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