

Rheumatology – Rheumatoid Arthritis

Introduction

The Covid pandemic has had a significant impact on the NHS ability to provide routine elective services. We recognise that patients are waiting longer than we would all like and it is not always possible to identify when treatment will take place. This document provides you with information on how you are able to support yourself while waiting to attend the hospital. The guidance has been written by clinicians who are responsible for your care

Guidance for Patients

Rheumatoid arthritis is a long-term condition that causes pain, swelling and stiffness in joints. The hands, wrists and feet are usually affected, but it may affect almost any joint. It happens when the body's immune system, which usually fights infection, starts to attack healthy joints instead. At times symptoms can become suddenly worse causing severe pain and making it hard to go about normal everyday life. Although there is no permanent cure for rheumatoid arthritis, early treatment can help to control it and help people carry on active and full lives.

Rheumatoid arthritis can affect different people in different ways but there are things that you can do to help your condition with the help of your GP and pharmacy:



Smoking: makes the condition worse and affects how well medications work. Please seek advice from your GP or pharmacy for help in stopping



Physical Activity: helps improve symptoms and benefits your overall health by reducing pain and joint stiffness



Healthy diet, low in fat, sugar, salt: Staying at a healthy weight reduces extra strain on your joints, such as your hips, knees and back



Medication: Take them as prescribed. You may need to take more than one medicine as they work in different ways and can be used for different symptoms

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What should I do if my health is deteriorating?

If your symptoms get worse this is known as a 'flare-up'

A flare is unpredictable and may start suddenly. It can last for hours, days, or even months if not treated. A flare may result in:

- Increased swelling
- Worsening pain
- More joint stiffness
- Increased tiredness
- Feeling generally unwell or feverish
- Decreased appetite

Sometimes a flare may follow an infection, such as a chest or urinary infection. In this case it is advisable to consult your GP as you may require treatment for the infection

During a flare you may need to:

- Adjust some of your medication. Taking painkillers and/or anti-inflammatory tablets regularly should help control and minimise the pain. Never exceed the maximum recommended dose. You should continue to take all your other medication as normal. Speak to your GP or local pharmacist for advice
- If you are taking steroid tablets, it is important that you do not alter the dose without consulting your GP first.
- Anti-inflammatory gels may be applied locally to the affected joints following the manufacturer's instructions

There are other things you can do to help yourself which can soothe painful joints:

- Rest or exercise? During a flare it is important to pace your activities. This means planning the day, taking into consideration your increased tiredness. You may need to take short rests in between activities but remember to keep those joints moving. This reduces stiffness and maintains muscle tone. You may be reluctant to exercise flaring joints, but it will help.
- Wearing wrist splints may help reduce pain by keeping the joint in a neutral position. Try to avoid putting pressure through an inflamed joint.
- Relaxation, distraction or imagery may help. This may include listening to music or picturing yourself in a pleasant environment.
- Heat therapy includes wheat bags, a hot water bottle or electric heat pads (make sure these are wrapped in a towel so as not to burn yourself) and place on the painful joint. Or even having a warm bath or shower.
- Cold therapy includes wheat bags, bag of frozen peas, bag of ice cubes, gel pack or a bowl of water with ice cubes for hands or feet. Make sure these are wrapped in a towel before placing on your joint.

Hot and cold treatments should be applied for up to 15 minute intervals, with the exception of iced water where 5 minutes is acceptable.

[Information for the public | Rheumatoid arthritis in adults: management | Guidance | NICE](#)

[About arthritis | Conditions, symptoms, treatments, support \(versusarthritis.org\)](#)

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Helpful Links

Rheumatoid arthritis is one of many other rheumatology conditions. A lot more information can be found here:

[Rheumatoid arthritis | Causes, symptoms, treatments \(versusarthritis.org\)](https://www.versusarthritis.org/)

[NRAS | Rheumatoid arthritis charity](https://www.nrasc.org.uk/)

[https:// National Axial Spondyloarthritis Society nass.co.uk/](https://www.nass.co.uk/)

[Ankylosing spondylitis | Symptoms, causes, treatments \(versusarthritis.org\)](https://www.versusarthritis.org/)

[Psoriatic arthritis | Psoriatic arthritis | Causes, symptoms, treatments \(versusarthritis.org\)](https://www.versusarthritis.org/)

[The Psoriasis Association \(psoriasis-association.org.uk\)](https://www.psoriasis-association.org.uk/)

[Psoriasis and Psoriatic Arthritis Alliance \(PAPAA\)](https://www.papaa.org.uk/)

Further Help

NHS Choices: www.nhs.uk/conditions

Arthritis UK

Website: [Versus Arthritis](https://www.arthritis.org.uk/)

Telephone: 0800 5200 520

Mansfield Arthritis support group

Telephone: 01623 844989

South Forest Arthritis Self-help Group (Arthritis Care in England)

Telephone: 01623 642596

NASS National Ankylosing Spondylitis Society

Website: [National Axial Spondyloarthritis Society](https://www.nass.co.uk/)

Telephone: 020 8741 1515

NRAS (National Rheumatoid Arthritis Support)

Website: [National Rheumatoid Arthritis Support - HELP](https://www.nrasc.org.uk/)

Telephone: 0800 298 7650

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Contact Details

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01623 672222

Please note we will not give explicit clinical advice via telephone/email until you have been reviewed within clinic by a consultant first.

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The contents of this information has been reviewed and approved by the Rheumatology Clinical Governance Meeting, Sherwood Forest Hospital Trust