



# Rheumatology – Keeping Well





## Introduction

Rheumatology is a service that specialises in the diagnosis and treatment of conditions that affect bones, joints and muscles. The department provides a comprehensive service for patients with autoimmune (inflammatory) conditions affecting joints, soft tissue, and other non-inflammatory conditions such as osteoporosis. The department is staffed by consultants, registrars, nurse specialists and rheumatology nurses.

The service is predominantly an outpatient based service, most of our patients will need to be seen face to face but when appropriate we can offer virtual appointments which include video and telephone consultations.

## Support while you wait

The Rheumatology Service has been significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Our staff have worked tirelessly through the pandemic to meet unprecedented levels of demand and unfortunately this has impacted our ability to deliver planned care. Though we must continue to prioritise the most critically unwell patients, we are doing everything we can to address the backlog of appointments with extra clinics and treatment sessions when possible.

We know that you may have experienced a long wait for your hospital appointment or treatment and understand how distressing this must be. We would like to apologise for this and assure you we are working hard to reach you as quickly as we can. We are exploring all possible options for increasing activity safely to bring wait times down.

To support you while you wait and to let you know that we are still here for you, we have provided this information and advice. It is designed to help you manage your condition and your overall health, so you arrive for your appointment in the best possible physical and mental health.

For more information about Rheumatology and your condition you can visit these websites:

- <https://www.versusarthritis.org/>
- <https://nras.org.uk/>
- <https://www.arthritisaction.org.uk/>
- <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/arthritis>
- <https://www.lupusuk.org.uk>

If you are waiting for your first outpatient appointment and your condition is very urgent please speak to your GP who can contact the Nurse Advice Line. If you are an existing patient, please contact your Consultant's Secretary, Specialist Nurse or the advice line.



## At your appointment

You will be asked some questions at your appointment - here are some examples to think about. If your appointment is to discuss the treatment options, the healthcare professional you are seeing will talk to you about:

- How your condition is affecting your life and what matters to you?
- What tests, examinations or investigations about your condition have found?
- Is there a choice of providers for your treatment? – sometimes it is possible to have your appointment more quickly by travelling out of your local area or if a private provider has been asked to deliver your care
- Are any activities that you won't be able to do for a while afterwards, for example certain kinds of work, household tasks like cleaning or doing the laundry, or driving?

It is also OK for you to ask questions. Your healthcare professional wants you to have all the information you need to help you to decide what the best plan and right treatment is for you. They will also take the time to make sure that you have understood all the information they have given you. It is your right to be involved as much or as little as you would like to be in decisions about your health and what treatment is right for you. You do not need to decide at your appointment. If you need more time to think about your options or to discuss these with family and friends, it is ok to ask for this.

## Cancelling your appointment

We understand that some patients may choose to have their appointment and treatment elsewhere. We advocate patient choice on where you access treatment though please do let us know if you no longer require an appointment with us. It is important that you notify us at the soonest possible opportunity so we can remove you from the waiting list. This can be done via telephone or online.

## Preparing for your treatment

It is a good idea to prepare your body and mind prior to any treatment. In the time before your treatment, you can take simple steps to help improve your physical and mental health. This can help to reduce your risk of complications from any surgery and improve your wellbeing now and during your recovery. Research shows that people who keep mentally or physically active feel happier and healthier, think of this as 'prehabilitation'

Maintaining and improving your overall wellbeing will lead to better clinical outcomes and it is a good idea to make the most of the time before you see your specialist by stopping smoking, maintaining a healthy weight, getting fitter and drinking less alcohol. Support is available to help you and can be found below.



## Take your medication

Please continue to take any medication as advised and prescribed by your GP or other healthcare professionals until you are informed to make any changes that may be required for treatment. It is important to bring a list of the medications you are taking to all appointments. If you have any queries please contact your GP.

## Improve your physical and mental health

If you are already active, keep moving or try and increase your activity levels if you can. Brisk walking, swimming, cycling, gardening, or playing with your children are all helpful. Try to do any activity which makes you feel out of breath at least three times per week, but always check with your doctor first what type of exercise is most appropriate for you. Activities that improve your strength and balance will also be useful for your recovery.

- Stick to healthy foods - Your body needs good nutrition to fight infection and heal following your procedure
- Avoid dehydration - drink at least six-eight glasses of fluid per day, preferably water.
- Avoid constipation - drink plenty of fluids and increase the amount of fibre in your diet. If this does not help you can attend your local pharmacy for over the counter remedies.
- Keep moving - Keeping an active lifestyle is good for your health and if you are normally an active person it is important to keep that up before your procedure.

### Smoking

Stopping smoking is hard but we strongly advise you to stop smoking as soon as possible because this will help to improve wound healing, lung function and you will make the best possible recovery. Now is a better time than ever to stop smoking. Smoking before a procedure puts you at a higher risk for post-operative heart attacks, stroke, blood clots, pneumonia and even death.

### Weight

If you are overweight, losing weight can help reduce the stress on your heart and lungs. In addition, it can help to:

- lower your blood pressure
- improve your blood sugar level
- reduce pain in your joints
- reduce your risk of blood clots after treatment
- reduce your risk of wound infections after treatment



- allow you to exercise more easily

## Alcohol

Alcohol can have many effects on the body but importantly it can reduce the liver's ability to produce the building blocks necessary for healing. Make sure you are drinking within the recommended limits, or lower, to improve your body's ability to heal. It is important to make sure any known conditions are controlled as well as possible ahead of your procedure. You can also book in for a general health check at your GP surgery if you are between 40 and 74 years old.

## Diabetes

Good control of your blood sugar is really important to reduce your risk of infections. Think about your diet and weight. Talk to your diabetes nurse or team early to see if they need to make any changes to your treatment.

## Blood pressure

Blood pressure should be controlled to safe levels to reduce the risk of stroke. Procedures may be delayed if it is too high. Have your blood pressure checked at your GP surgery well ahead of your treatment – some GP surgeries have automated machines so you can pop in any time. If it is high, your GP can check your medications and make any changes needed ahead of the procedure.

## Anaemia (low blood count)

If you have been bleeding or have a chronic medical condition, a blood test can check whether you are anaemic. If you are, you should talk to your GP about treatment to improve your blood count before surgery. Treating your anaemia before surgery reduces the chance of you needing a blood transfusion. It will also help your recovery and make you feel less tired after your surgery.

## Heart, lung, and other medical problems

If you have any other long-term medical problems, consider asking your GP or nurse for a review of your medications, especially if you think your health is not as good as it could be.

## COVID-19 vaccination

If you are eligible for a COVID-19 vaccination, it is recommended that you have this prior to attending hospital appointments or surgery. To find out if you are eligible, [visit the NHS COVID-19 vaccination pages](#). If you are eligible and would [like to book your vaccination appointment, visit the national booking service](#).

## Healthy living

It's normal to feel anxious about medical treatment, particularly if you require surgery. People who are able to improve their health and activity levels recover more quickly after



treatment.

We all have parts of our lives that we would like to change, from stopping smoking to achieving and maintaining a healthier weight. The good news is that, as well as improving your health in the long term, making those changes ahead of your treatment can reduce your risk of a range of complications and can also help you recover more quickly from any surgery.

### Managing pain

We know that some people will be in pain while they are waiting for an appointment or treatment. Pain can have a huge impact on our lives; from how we move, to our mood and sleep. Frustratingly, pain can affect what matters most to us in life; from our relationships with family and friends, to our ability to work or take part in hobbies.

Everyone's pain experience is different and everyone has different goals they would like to achieve. Having better knowledge about your condition can help increase your confidence when making decisions around what to change and how to take control back of your life.

### Money worries

Waiting for an appointment or treatment could have an effect on how many hours you are able to work, and how much you are earning. If you are struggling to pay bills, need help with a benefits issue, or are concerned about growing debt, there is free, confidential support and advice available.

- Benefit Calculator - Turn2Us (<https://benefits-calculator.turn2us.org.uk>)
- Free Debt Advice - Step change ([https://www.stepchange.org/?channel=ppc&gclid=Cj0KCQiA5OuNBhCRARIsACgaiqWqryplLKfryDhpGNnl\\_SVXX2po9jQKyIEb\\_rgGoa8ivlqMqiAdHBQaAomdEALw\\_wcB](https://www.stepchange.org/?channel=ppc&gclid=Cj0KCQiA5OuNBhCRARIsACgaiqWqryplLKfryDhpGNnl_SVXX2po9jQKyIEb_rgGoa8ivlqMqiAdHBQaAomdEALw_wcB))
- NHS - Low income Scheme (<https://www.nhsbsa.nhs.uk/nhs-low-income-scheme>)
- Access to Work - Employment support programme that aims to help more disabled people start or stay in work (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/access-to-work-factsheet/access-to-work-factsheet-for-customers>)
- Your local Citizens Advice can also help you find a way forward, whatever the problem. They offer confidential information and advice to assist people with legal, debt, consumer, housing, and other problems. Contact your local Citizens Advice (<https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/>) office for more information and access to online support.

### Carers can need help too - support is available



We know that there are many people who are caring for family and friends while they are waiting for a hospital appointment or treatment. This might include help with washing, dressing, shopping, and taking medicines and also emotional support, ensuring that the person feels cared for and not alone. Carers UK (<https://www.carersuk.org/help-and-advice/get-support>) are a national charity that offers support for carers with employment, practical support, technology and equipment among other things.

### Good mental health

People sometimes feel worried or anxious before a hospital appointment or treatment. This is perfectly normal. Some people might also find that an existing mental health condition gets worse. You can find helpful links for mental health support on the NHS website: [www.nhs.uk/mental-health/](http://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/)

Mental health charity Mind also has webpages about COVID-19 and your wellbeing: [www.mind.org.uk/information-support/coronavirus/coronavirus-and-your-wellbeing](http://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/coronavirus/coronavirus-and-your-wellbeing)

Talking therapies, or psychological therapies, are effective and confidential treatments delivered by fully trained and accredited NHS practitioners. They can help with common mental health problems like stress, anxiety and depression.