

## Media Fact Sheet

### About Rheumatoid Arthritis

**What is rheumatoid arthritis?** Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is an autoimmune disease that causes pain and swelling of the joints. The normal role of the body's immune system is to fight off infections.

When a person has an autoimmune disease, the immune system starts attacking the body's healthy tissues. In the case of rheumatoid arthritis, the immune system targets the lining of the joints, causing inflammation and joint damage. RA usually affects smaller joints, such as the joints in the hands and feet. However larger joints such as the hips and knees can also be affected.

**What are the symptoms?** The symptoms of RA vary from person to person. The most common symptoms are:

- joint pain, swelling, and tenderness to touch
- stiffness in the joints, especially in the morning
- the same joints on both sides of the body are affected.

**What causes it?** It is not known what causes RA. It is more common in people who smoke and/or those who have a family history of RA.

**How is it diagnosed?** A doctor will diagnose RA based on symptoms, a physical examination and various tests. These can include:

- blood tests for inflammation
- blood tests for rheumatoid factor and/or CCP antibody, a newer and more specific test for RA
- x-rays to see if joints are being damaged by the disease.

It can be difficult, and often takes quite some time, to diagnose RA as the symptoms can be similar to other types of arthritis.

If a doctor suspects a patient of having RA, the patient should be referred to a rheumatologist, a doctor who specialises in arthritis.

**What happens to people with RA?** With early diagnosis and the right treatment, most people with RA can lead full and active lives. However the course of RA varies and no two cases are the same. Many people with RA experience 'flares', periods when joints become more inflamed and painful. These can happen with no obvious cause. 'Flares' are commonly followed by months or even years of little inflammation. RA can cause permanent joint damage and deformity, especially in the first few years of the disease. The good news is that early diagnosis and treatment is shown to limit this type of joint damage.

**Is there a cure for RA?** Currently there is no cure for RA. However treatment has improved dramatically over the past 20 years, with new medicines now extremely helpful for people in the early stages of RA.

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**What treatments are there for RA?** A rheumatologist will tailor treatment to a patient's symptoms and the severity of their condition. There is no way of predicting exactly which treatment will work best. A rheumatologist may need to trial several different treatments before finding the one that is right and this treatment may include:

- medicines, such as
  - non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs)
  - corticosteroid medicines or injections
  - disease-modifying anti-rheumatic drugs (DMARDs)
  - biological DMARDs, such as tumour necrosis factor (TNF) blocking medicines
- exercise, to keep the joints flexible and muscles strong.

Further information is available on the Arthritis Australia website at [www.arthritisaustralia.com.au](http://www.arthritisaustralia.com.au).

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