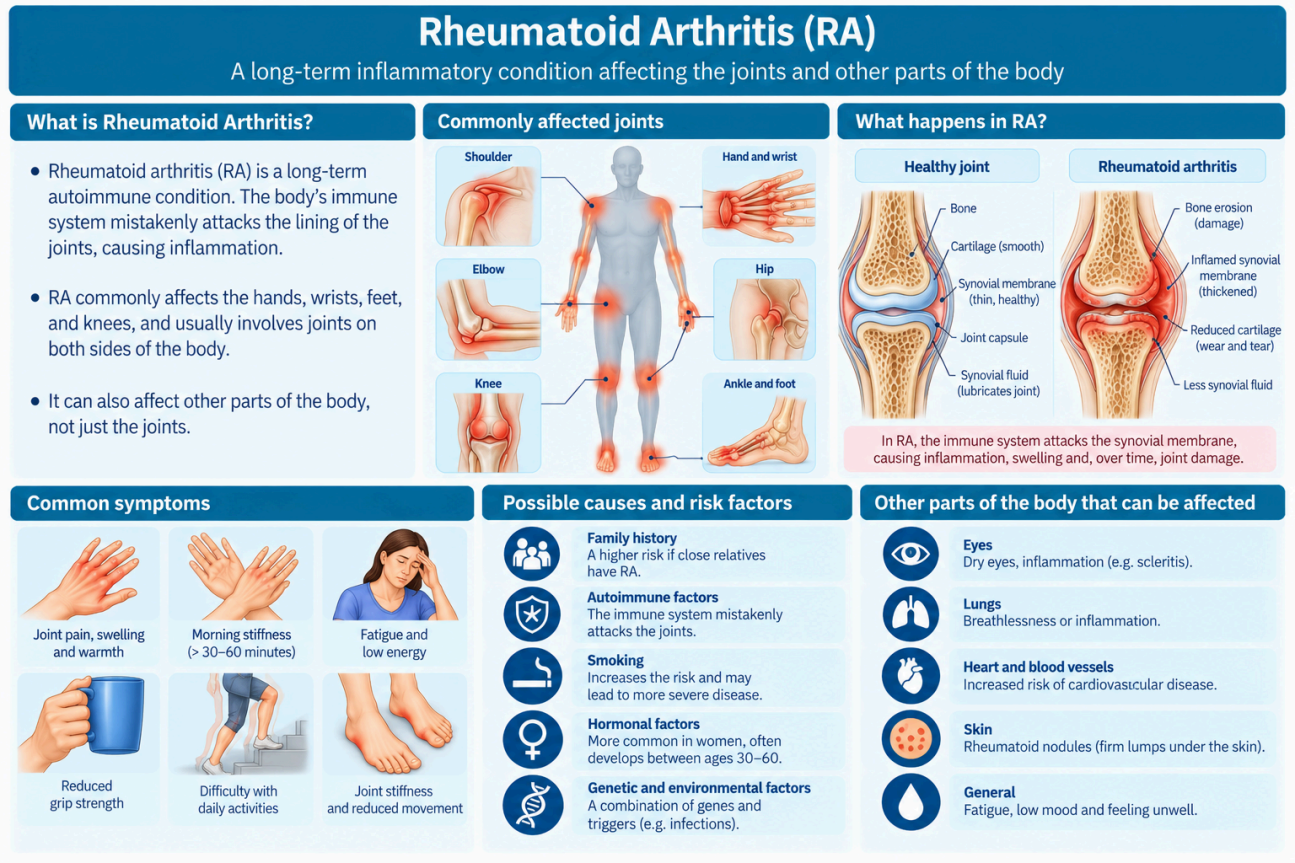
Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA)

Understanding joint inflammation, symptoms and management

Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA)

A guide to causes, symptoms and treatment



What is rheumatoid arthritis?

RA is a long-term autoimmune condition in which the immune system attacks the lining of joints, causing inflammation. It commonly affects the hands, wrists, feet and knees, often on both sides of the body.

What causes RA?

The exact cause is unknown. Risk factors include family history, smoking and hormonal factors. RA is different from wear-and-tear osteoarthritis.

Symptoms and diagnosis

Recognising RA and understanding how it is assessed

Common symptoms

Joint pain, swelling and warmth; morning stiffness lasting more than 30-60 minutes; fatigue; reduced grip strength; and difficulty with everyday activities.

Symptoms beyond the joints

Some people also experience dry eyes or nodules. Symptoms may fluctuate, with periods of worsening known as flare-ups.

How is rheumatoid arthritis diagnosed?

A clinician considers your symptoms and medical history, blood tests for inflammation and antibodies, and sometimes X-rays, ultrasound or MRI.

Why early diagnosis matters

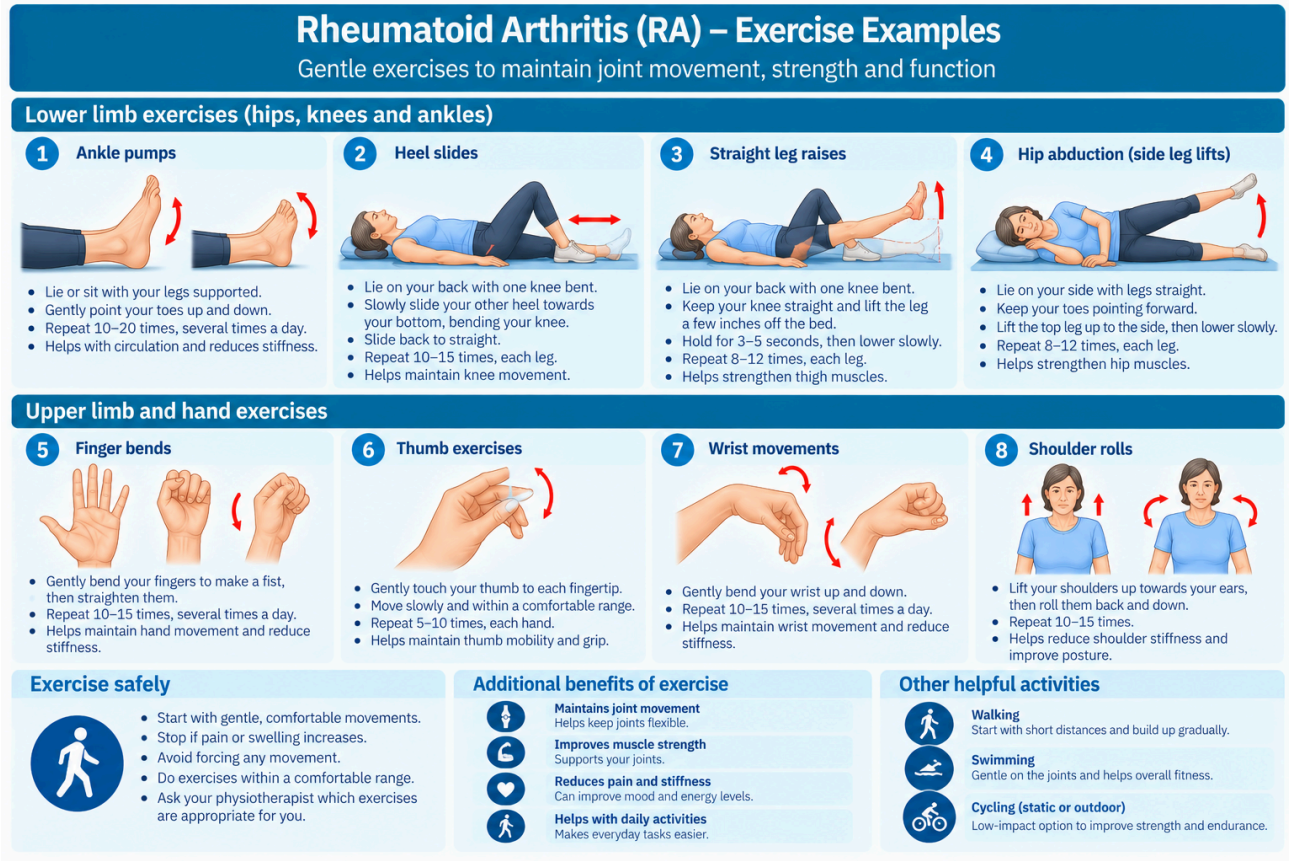
Early treatment can reduce inflammation and help prevent long-term joint damage. Seek medical assessment for persistent joint swelling and stiffness.

Understanding flare-ups

A flare-up is a period of increased pain, swelling, stiffness or fatigue. Adjust activity and speak to your healthcare team if symptoms persist.

Exercise examples

Gentle joint movement and strengthening with physiotherapy guidance



Exercise safely

Begin with gentle, comfortable movements and increase gradually. Avoid forcing painful or swollen joints. If an exercise increases pain or swelling, stop and ask your physiotherapist for advice.

Adjust activity during flare-ups

Reduce strenuous exercise during a flare and allow extra rest, while maintaining gentle movement as tolerated. Your physiotherapist can tailor exercises to your symptoms and joint health.

Treatment and when to seek help

Managing inflammation and protecting joint health

Medication and specialist care

Rheumatology specialists may prescribe disease-modifying anti-rheumatic drugs (DMARDs), biologic medicines, or short-term anti-inflammatory medicines or steroids.

Self-management

Pace activities, use heat or cold packs for symptom relief, maintain a healthy weight, stop smoking and protect joints from excessive strain.

Managing flare-ups

Reduce activity during symptom flares while maintaining gentle movement. Contact your healthcare team if symptoms remain worse or treatment is not working.

When to seek medical advice

Contact your GP or rheumatology team if symptoms worsen, medication causes side effects, or you develop signs of infection.

Key points to remember

RA is a long-term inflammatory condition. Early treatment matters; medication and physiotherapy work together, and suitable activity supports joint health.

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