

# understanding your condition

## Rheumatoid Arthritis

Receiving a medical diagnosis, such as rheumatoid arthritis, may be overwhelming and scary. Learning about the condition, and how to cope with it, can make it more manageable.

### Condition Introduction

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is an autoimmune disease. Autoimmune conditions occur when the immune system mistakenly targets and attacks specific healthy cells in the body, causing damage. In RA, the immune system attacks the lining of the joints, which causes pain and swelling. This can also cause stiffness, loss of normal movement, and sometimes change the shape of joints. The inflammation from RA can occur in other areas of the body too. The cause of RA is unknown; however, genetic factors and bacteria and/or viruses may play a role. Women are more likely to get RA compared to men and make up about 75% of RA cases.

### Symptoms

Rheumatoid arthritis is an [autoimmune](#) disease where symptoms can come and go without warning. A period of symptoms is called a “flare” or “flare-up”, while a symptom-free period is called “remission”. See below for common symptoms during a flare-up.

### Most Common Symptoms

- Painful, swollen joints
- Pain and stiffness after sleeping or long periods of sitting
- Symmetrical joint inflammation; pain and swelling occurring at the same time on both sides of the body.
- Ex: Left wrist and right wrist
- Body discomfort
- Extreme tiredness
- Fever
- Anemia (low iron)

### Severe Symptoms

- Damaged or weakened tendons
- Damaged or destroyed ligaments, joint cartilage, and bone due to swelling
- Bone loss leading to misshapen joints

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### How Nutrition is Affected by Rheumatoid Arthritis

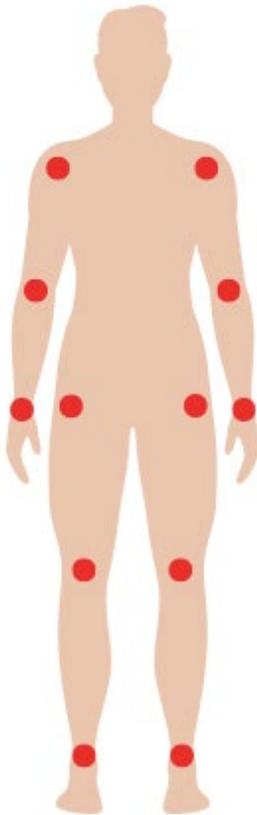
To better understand this disease, your symptoms, and how nutrition is affected, **see the table below for more details.**

Understanding Symptoms and How Nutrition is Affected by Rheumatoid Arthritis	
General Overview	How Nutrition is Affected
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Swelling of the lining of the joints usually begins in the smaller joints that connect the fingers to the hands and toes to the feet.</li><li>• Wrists, knees, ankles, elbows, hips and shoulders may also become swollen and painful.</li><li>• Non-joint body parts including, skin, eyes, lungs, heart, kidneys, salivary glands, nerve tissue, bone marrow and blood vessels can also be affected as the disease progresses.</li><li>• Pain and swelling of the joints most often occurs on both sides of the body.</li><li>• Some people may experience rheumatoid nodules (lumps) that form under the skin.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Painful joints can make it challenging to shop, prepare meals, or eat, increasing the risk for being deficient in certain nutrients.</li><li>• If pain occurs in the jaw, it can decrease the ability to chew or swallow, which can lead to a low nutrient intake and low levels of important nutrients in the body.</li><li>• Certain RA medications can affect how your body absorbs certain vitamins and minerals, increasing the body's need for those nutrients.</li><li>• In severe RA, the body requires more energy to function, increasing the need for calories and protein.</li></ul>

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### How Rheumatoid Arthritis Affects the Body

People with rheumatoid arthritis often have periods of symptoms called “flare-ups” and symptom-free times, called “remission”. To better understand how this disease affects the body, **see the table below for more details.**



RA usually first appears in the small joints of the hands and feet, but can later move to larger joints like wrists, elbows, and knees. This disease can also lead to the development of other health problems, including:

- Low iron
- Fever
- Eye inflammation
- Infection
- Extreme tiredness

People with RA may also be at higher risk of having heart disease, certain types of cancer, gastrointestinal diseases, and osteoporosis (low bone density).

### Treatment

There are many treatment goals. These goals involve reducing pain, lowering inflammation, slowing the spread of the disease through the body, and improving quality of life. Common RA treatments include medications and surgery. Lifestyle changes, like diet, getting enough sleep, stress management, and exercise, are also an important part of staying well with RA.