



Rheumatoid arthritis

Overview

Rheumatoid arthritis is an ongoing, called chronic, condition that causes pain, swelling and irritation, called inflammation, in the joints. But it also can damage other parts of the body. These may include the skin, eyes, lungs, heart and blood vessels.

Rheumatoid arthritis happens when the immune system attacks its own body's tissues by mistake. This is called an autoimmune condition.

Rheumatoid arthritis differs from the more common osteoarthritis. Some people have both. Osteoarthritis causes damage to joints from overuse. Rheumatoid arthritis affects the lining of the joints and eats away at the bone under them. This causes a painful swelling that can cause joints to bend out of shape over time, called deformity.

The inflammation of rheumatoid arthritis also can damage other parts of the body. New medicines have improved treatment choices greatly. But rheumatoid arthritis still can cause long-term damage and increase the risk of heart disease.

Symptoms

Symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis may include:

- Painful, warm, swollen joints.
- Joint stiffness that most often is worse in the mornings and after periods of rest. It can last for 45 minutes or longer.
- Tiredness, fever and not wanting to eat.

Rheumatoid arthritis may affect just a few joints at first. Most often, these are the small joints of the hands and the feet.

As the disease gets worse, symptoms may spread to more joints. These most often include the wrists, elbows, hips, knees and ankles. Most of the time, symptoms affect the same joints on both sides of the body.

Many people who have rheumatoid arthritis also have symptoms that affect more than the joints. Areas that may be affected include:

- Skin.
- Eyes.
- Lungs.
- Heart.
- Nerve tissue.
- Blood.

Rheumatoid arthritis symptoms may vary in how bad they are. They may come and go. Periods when the condition becomes more active, called flares, follow periods of less or no swelling and pain. This is called remission.

Over time, rheumatoid arthritis can cause joints to bend out of shape and shift out of place. The joints can be hard to use for daily activities at home or at work.

When to see a doctor

Make an appointment with your healthcare professional if you have ongoing pain and swelling in your joints that is not getting better after several weeks.

Causes

Experts don't know the cause of rheumatoid arthritis. But it's a condition in which the immune system attacks healthy joint tissue by mistake, called autoimmune.

The cause is likely a mix of genetic changes and factors from outside the body, called environmental. Hormones may play a role. An infection with certain viruses may start rheumatoid arthritis in people whose genes make them more likely to get it.

Risk factors

Factors that may increase your risk of rheumatoid arthritis include:

- **Your sex.** People assigned female at birth are more likely than those assigned male at birth to get rheumatoid arthritis.

- **Age.** Rheumatoid arthritis can happen at any age. But most often it begins in middle age. Children and young teens may get a related condition called juvenile idiopathic arthritis.
- **Family history.** Having a family member with rheumatoid arthritis or other autoimmune conditions may raise the risk of the condition.
- **Smoking.** Cigarette smoking over time raises the risk of getting rheumatoid arthritis. Smoking also seems to make the condition worse in people who keep smoking.
- **Gum infection.** A serious gum infection, called periodontal disease, can damage the soft tissue around teeth and raise the risk of getting rheumatoid arthritis.
- **Excess weight.** People who are overweight seem to be at a somewhat higher risk of getting rheumatoid arthritis.

Complications

Rheumatoid arthritis increases the risk of getting:

- **Osteoporosis.** Rheumatoid arthritis itself, and some medicines used to treat it, can increase the risk of this condition. Osteoporosis weakens bones and makes them more likely to break.
- **Rheumatoid nodules.** These firm bumps of tissue most often form around pressure points, such as the elbows. But these nodules can form anywhere in the body, including the heart and lungs.
- **Dry eyes and mouth.** People who have rheumatoid arthritis are much more likely to get a condition that lowers the amount of moisture in the eyes and mouth. This is called secondary Sjogren's syndrome.
- **Infections.** Rheumatoid arthritis and many of the medicines used to treat it can harm the immune system. This can lead to more infections. Vaccinations can help prevent infections such as the flu, pneumonia, shingles and COVID-19.
- **Carpal tunnel syndrome.** If rheumatoid arthritis affects the wrists, the swelling can press on the nerve to the hand and fingers.
- **Heart problems.** Rheumatoid arthritis can raise the risk of hardened and blocked arteries. It also can raise the risk of swelling and irritation, called inflammation, of the sac around the heart.
- **Lung disease.** People with rheumatoid arthritis have a higher risk of swelling and irritation, called inflammation, of lung tissues. This can cause scarring and lead to shortness of breath that gets worse over time.
- **Lymphoma.** Rheumatoid arthritis raises the risk of a group of blood cancers that happen in the lymph system. This is called lymphoma. People with rheumatoid arthritis may have a higher risk of other cancers, as well.

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