

RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS

Making the Most of Your Relationship With Your Rheumatologist





Early Diagnosis and Appropriate Treatment Are Important

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is a chronic autoimmune disease. It causes joints to swell and can result in pain, stiffness, and progressive loss of function. Over time, RA can cause permanent joint damage. It is important to get an accurate diagnosis as early as possible so you can begin an appropriate treatment plan.¹

If you have not been diagnosed with RA, but think you may have it, it's important to see a doctor right away. When talking with your family doctor about your symptoms, he or she may refer you to a rheumatologist.

What Is a Rheumatologist?²

Rheumatologists are doctors who can help diagnose and treat patients with diseases of the joints, muscles, and bones. A rheumatologist understands the signs and symptoms of certain autoimmune diseases, and is most qualified to treat patients with RA.

Why Is Seeing a Rheumatologist Important?

The American College of Rheumatology recommends that patients with RA see a rheumatologist.³ If you have joint pain that persists for more than 6 to 8 weeks, you should ask your doctor if a referral to a rheumatologist is appropriate.⁴ Irreversible joint damage can occur early in the disease, often within the first few years that you have RA.⁵ Early diagnosis and appropriate management of RA are important. A rheumatologist may work with your regular doctor, but should play a major role in managing your RA.⁴

A Rheumatologist Can Help You:

- Determine if you have RA
- Develop an appropriate treatment plan that can help:
 - Relieve joint pain, stiffness, and swelling
 - Slow or prevent further joint damage



How Can I Make the Most of an Office Visit With a Rheumatologist?

At every visit, it's important to be honest and open about how you're feeling and how RA affects your daily life. Here are a few helpful hints.

- **Prepare for every visit.** Write down questions, concerns, and symptoms to discuss. Being organized will help you make the best use of time during your visit.
- **Repeat important information.** When your doctor shares important information, repeat it back in your own words to make sure you understand it, and write it down so you don't forget it.
- **Be open.** Describe the ways that RA affects you. If you haven't been following your treatment plan, be honest about it. Don't be afraid to ask questions, or to ask for an explanation if you don't understand the answers.
- **Keep a journal.** Record the way your RA impacts you, details on your symptoms, and any side effects from your medication. Keep track of your symptoms, including the timing so you can describe when they started, how they changed over time, and how long they lasted. Use your journal to write down questions as they occur to you.
- **Bring a completed RA Profile to every visit.** This will help keep track of how much pain you feel in each joint and how RA is affecting your ability to carry out daily activities. Tracking your answers over time can help you and your doctor see how well your RA is being managed.
- **Consider bringing a family member or friend with you.** They may help you stay focused during the visit, recall important points after the visit, and help you get around if that is an issue.
- **Keep a list of the medications you're taking and their dosages.** Include prescription medications, over-the-counter drugs, and supplements. It's important to tell your doctor if any of your medications have changed since the previous visit.
- **Participate in decisions.** Express your concerns and opinions so you and your rheumatologist can come up with a plan that works best for you.
- **Follow up.** If you forgot to ask a question during your visit, or if something that your rheumatologist said to you is unclear afterwards, you can call the office and leave a message with your question.



Questions to Ask at Your First Visit With a Rheumatologist

Not sure what to ask at your first office visit with a rheumatologist?

Here are a few questions to get you started:

- What effect will RA have on my body? How will it change over time?
- Will I need to have tests done? How often?
- How can I relieve the symptoms of RA?
- What treatments are available?
- Which treatments do you think are most appropriate for me?
- What side effects can I expect?
- How long will it take before my treatment starts to work?
- How often will I need to see you?

Talk to your rheumatologist on a regular basis about your RA. Feel free to ask questions about the disease, and to discuss any concerns you may have, your symptoms, and progress.

Together, you and your rheumatologist can find a plan to manage your RA.

References: 1. Weinblatt M, Kuritzky L. RAPID: rheumatoid arthritis. *J Fam Pract.* 2007 Apr;56(4 Suppl):S1-S7; quiz S8. 2. American College of Rheumatology. What is a rheumatologist? Atlanta, GA: American College of Rheumatology, 2010. <http://www.rheumatology.org/practice/clinical/patients/rheumatologist>. Accessed May 7, 2012. 3. American College of Rheumatology Subcommittee on Rheumatoid Arthritis Guidelines. Guidelines for the management of rheumatoid arthritis: 2002 update. *Arthritis Rheum.* 2002 Feb;46(2):328-346. 4. Suresh E. Diagnosis of early rheumatoid arthritis: what the non-specialist needs to know. *J R Soc Med.* 2004;97:421-424. 5. Lipsky PE. Rheumatoid arthritis. In: Fauci AS, Kasper DL, Longo DL, et al, eds. *Harrison's Principles of Internal Medicine*. 17th ed. New York: McGraw-Hill; 2008:2083-2092.