

# LIVING HEALTHY

## Living with

# Rheumatoid Arthritis

Sponsored by South Peninsula Hospital

Rheumatoid arthritis (rue-ma-TOYD arth-write-tis) is a chronic disease that affects 2.1 million Americans, mainly characterized by inflammation of the lining, or synovium, of the joints. It can lead to long-term joint damage, resulting in chronic pain, loss of function and disability. While there is no cure, it is easier than ever to control it through the use of new drugs, exercise, joint protection techniques and self-management techniques.

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) progresses in three stages. The first stage is the swelling of the synovial lining, causing pain, warmth, stiffness, redness and swelling around the joint. Second is the rapid division and growth of cells which causes the synovium to thicken. In the third stage, the inflamed cells release enzymes that may digest bone and cartilage, often causing the involved joint to lose its shape and alignment, more pain, and loss of movement.

### What causes it?

The exact cause of rheumatoid arthritis currently is unknown. In fact, there probably isn't an exact cause for RA. Researchers now are debating whether RA is one disease or several different diseases with common features. We do know that the body's immune system plays an important role in rheumatoid arthritis because people with RA have an abnormal immune system that mistakes the body's healthy tissue for a foreign invader and attacks it.

### Self-Management Techniques

Having the appropriate diagnosis and medical treatment from your doctor is important in the success of your life with rheumatoid arthritis. Equally important are the things you can do yourself to limit the impact of RA on your life.

Exercise is an important component in staying healthy when you have RA. Moderate physical activity on a regular

basis helps decrease fatigue, strengthen muscles and bones, increase flexibility and stamina, and improve your general sense of well-being. Joint flexibility is especially important because stiff joints means inability to do daily tasks, such as buttoning a shirt or starting the car.

It is important to stay active because you want to keep your joints flexible and healthy. However, you don't want to push yourself too hard and end up in bed or do damage to your joints. So how do you know how much is too much and find balance in your life? Listen to your body. If you feel fatigued, and if an activity causes you pain for more than two hours after you stop, then you need to slow down, and incorporate rest periods in your day. Rest is an important part of the story, as is good, healthy activity - not just exercise. Staying active helps you manage your stress and depression as well as helping to improve your sleep and making it less painful to move your joints.

*Stress* - We all have stress in our lives - both good and bad. Unfortunately, good stress and bad stress can bring on a flare of your RA. Over time stress can wear you down because your body isn't designed to be running on high alert all the time. People with optimistic outlooks and feelings of being in control tend to do better over the long-term than people with less positive feelings about their RA.

*Depression* - It is not uncommon for someone with a chronic illness like arthritis to become depressed. It isn't unusual for someone who is living with pain, fatigue and loss of function to feel overwhelmed and anxious about the future. Mild depression can be helped through social interaction or doing something you find fun, such as shopping or a hobby. If your depression is something more than just the "blues," speak to your doctor.

### *Relaxation & Sleep*

Learning to relax is an important part of dealing with stress, as is getting a good night's sleep. Chances are you know the lifestyle and environment that encourages both of these, and you have to stay committed to living that way to ensure you relax and get a good night's sleep.

For more information on RA, talk to your doctor or visit [www.arthritis.org](http://www.arthritis.org)

*Courtesy of the Arthritis Foundation*

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