

## Understanding NICE guidance

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Information for people who use NHS services

# Rheumatoid arthritis in adults

*NICE 'clinical guidelines' advise the NHS on caring for people with specific conditions or diseases and the treatments they should receive.*

This booklet is about the care and treatment of adults with rheumatoid arthritis in the NHS in England and Wales. It explains guidance (advice) from NICE (the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence). It is written for people with rheumatoid arthritis but it may also be useful for their families or carers or for anyone with an interest in the condition.

The booklet is to help you understand the care and treatment options that should be available in the NHS. It does not describe rheumatoid arthritis or the tests or treatments for it in detail. A member of your healthcare team should discuss these with you. There are examples of questions you could ask throughout this booklet to help you with this. You can get more information from the organisations listed on page 11.

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The advice in the NICE guideline covers the care of adults with rheumatoid arthritis. It does not specifically look at other types of arthritis such as osteoarthritis. NICE has also produced guidance on osteoarthritis (see page 11).

## Your care

Your treatment and care should take into account your personal needs and preferences, and you have the right to be fully informed and to make decisions in partnership with your healthcare team. To help with this, your healthcare team should give you information you can understand and that is relevant to your circumstances. All healthcare professionals should treat you with respect, sensitivity and understanding and explain rheumatoid arthritis and the treatments for it simply and clearly.

The information you get from your healthcare team should include details of the possible benefits and risks of particular treatments. You can ask any questions you want to and can always change your mind as your treatment progresses or your condition or circumstances change. Your own preference for a particular treatment is important and your healthcare team should support your choice of treatment wherever possible.

Your treatment and care, and the information you are given about it, should take account of any religious, ethnic or cultural needs you may have. It should also take into account any additional factors, such as physical or learning disabilities, sight or hearing problems, or difficulties with reading or speaking English. Your healthcare team should be able to arrange an interpreter or an advocate (someone who supports you in putting across your views) if needed.

If you agree, your family and carers should have the chance to be involved in decisions about your care. Family members and carers also have the right to the information and support they need in their roles as carers.

If people are unable to understand a particular issue or are not able to make decisions for themselves, healthcare professionals should follow the advice that the Department of Health has produced about this.

You can find this by going to the Department of Health website ([www.dh.gov.uk/consent](http://www.dh.gov.uk/consent)). Your healthcare professional should also follow the code of practice for the Mental Capacity Act. For more information about this, visit [www.publicguardian.gov.uk](http://www.publicguardian.gov.uk)

## Rheumatoid arthritis

Rheumatoid arthritis is a long-term disease in which joints in the body become inflamed, causing pain, swelling and stiffness. It is known as an 'autoimmune disease' because it is caused when the body's immune system, which normally fights infection, starts to attack healthy joints. At times, rheumatoid arthritis can be very painful and affect a person's ability to carry out everyday tasks.

It is not known why rheumatoid arthritis develops, and there is no cure. However, understanding of the disease has improved, and there are now effective treatments that can help ease the pain and symptoms, and slow down the disease. It is very important that treatment is started early to minimise damage to joints.

## Finding out if you have rheumatoid arthritis

If you have ongoing warmth, redness and swelling in any of your joints, but your GP doesn't know what's causing these symptoms, you should be offered a referral to see a specialist in rheumatology.

If your healthcare professionals think you might have rheumatoid arthritis, they will look at your joints, and may offer you blood tests and X-rays to help them make a diagnosis.

## If you have rheumatoid arthritis

If you are diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis, your GP or a member of your healthcare team should discuss the condition with you. They should also give you some written information to help you understand the disease and what you can do to help ease your pain and symptoms.

*If you think that your care does not match what is described in this booklet, please talk to a member of your healthcare team in the first instance.*

### Questions you might like to ask your healthcare team

- What suggests I may have rheumatoid arthritis?
- What could these blood tests and/or X-rays show, and how would this help?
- Does rheumatoid arthritis only affect the joints?
- Why is it important to refer me to a specialist early?
- I feel tired – is this related to rheumatoid arthritis?

*Some treatments may not be suitable for you, depending on your exact circumstances. If you have questions about specific treatments and options covered in this booklet, please talk to a member of your healthcare team.*

## Managing rheumatoid arthritis

There is a range of treatments available to help manage rheumatoid arthritis. These include medication, physiotherapy, occupational therapy and surgery.

### Medication

Early treatment of rheumatoid arthritis is important to minimise joint damage and help you to live as normal a life as possible. There are several different types of medication available. Some control the disease itself, and some help to ease symptoms. Your healthcare team will help you to find the best treatments for you.

Your specialist should offer you 'disease-modifying anti-rheumatic drugs' (usually known as DMARDs), including methotrexate. DMARDs also include 'biological' drugs, some of which are called 'anti-TNFs'. DMARDs reduce the immune response that causes the damage to your joints. You may be offered more than one of these drugs at once; this is called combination therapy.

There are several different types of pain-relieving medication that you may be offered. These include non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, which are commonly referred to as NSAIDs (such as aspirin, ibuprofen and drugs called COX-2 inhibitors). These help to reduce inflammation as well as relieve pain. NSAIDs can affect your digestive system, so to protect it you should also be offered another type of drug (called a proton pump inhibitor).

If you are already taking a low dose of aspirin for another condition, it's unlikely to be enough to ease the pain of rheumatoid arthritis. Therefore your specialist may offer you another type of pain relief, such as paracetamol, instead of another NSAID.

### Questions you might like to ask about your treatment

- Why is this particular type of treatment suitable for me?
- What are the risks and benefits of this treatment?
- Are there any other options?
- What would happen if I chose not to have this treatment?
- How long will I need to have this treatment?
- Will this new treatment affect other medication I'm already taking?
- Why am I being offered several medications at once?
- What will happen if this treatment doesn't work?

*If you have talked to your healthcare team, and you think that a treatment is suitable for you but it is not available, you can contact your local patient advice and liaison service ('PALS').*

## **Other treatments**

You should be offered regular physiotherapy to improve your fitness. Your physiotherapist should teach you exercises to help make your joints more flexible and increase muscle strength. They should also give you information about other forms of pain relief (such as a type of electrotherapy known as transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation [TENS for short]).

You should be able to see an occupational therapist regularly if your rheumatoid arthritis affects your hands or is causing difficulties in everyday life. Occupational therapy helps you to carry out everyday tasks and activities on your own, at home and at work, through using equipment (such as a device that helps you unscrew jar lids). Occupational therapists can also help you to adjust to living with your condition by, for example, offering to show you relaxation and stress-management techniques.

If you have problems with your feet, you should be offered regular appointments with a specialist in foot problems called a podiatrist. You should also be able to have footwear that helps you with these problems.

### **Questions you might like to ask your healthcare team**

- Who will be managing my treatment, and what will they do?
- How can I get specialist help quickly?
- Where can I learn more about managing my rheumatoid arthritis?
- Are there any groups I can join to help me exercise?

## **Diet and complementary therapies**

There is no strong evidence that diet affects rheumatoid arthritis. However, if you want to experiment with what you eat, you could try a Mediterranean-style diet, with more bread, fruit, vegetables and fish and less meat, and products made from vegetable and plant oils (such as olive oil) instead of products such as butter and cheese.

Although some complementary therapies (such as massage) may help your symptoms in the short term, there is little or no evidence that any will help in the long term. If you do decide to try a complementary therapy, you should continue to receive the same care and treatments from your healthcare team.

## **Surgery**

If you have severe rheumatoid arthritis or if your symptoms get worse despite trying a number of treatments, you may be offered a referral to discuss the possibility of surgery. The main benefits are pain relief and improving joint function (or preventing further loss of joint function).

## Check-ups

You should be offered regular appointments with your healthcare team to check how you are managing on a day-to-day basis. There should be a specific person in this team who will manage the different aspects of your care, and you should be given their name and contact details.

If your rheumatoid arthritis is in the early stages, you should see a member of your healthcare team every month to check how well your treatments are reducing your symptoms and improving your everyday life. At these appointments your healthcare professional will usually ask you questions, offer you a blood test (or look at your blood test results if you've already had one) and check your joints. Depending on how well your treatments are working and if you have had any side effects, they may suggest changing the dosages or trying different medications.

Once your symptoms are under control, you should be able to have these check-ups as often as you need. You should also be told when and how to get help quickly if you need it, and be able to see someone if your rheumatoid arthritis flares up in between your normal check-ups.

Once a year, you should have a more in-depth check-up. This involves a member of your healthcare team looking in greater detail at the management of your rheumatoid arthritis, the impact it's having on your life, how you feel in yourself, and your overall state of health.

### Question you might like to ask your healthcare team

- Why do I need a yearly check-up, and what will it involve?

## More information

The organisations below can provide more information and support for people with rheumatoid arthritis. Please note that NICE is not responsible for the quality or accuracy of any information or advice provided by these organisations.

- National Rheumatoid Arthritis Society, 0800 298 7650  
[www.rheumatoid.org.uk](http://www.rheumatoid.org.uk)
- Arthritis Care, 0808 800 4050, or 0808 808 2000 for under 26s  
[www.arthritiscare.org.uk](http://www.arthritiscare.org.uk)

NHS Choices ([www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)) may be a good place to find out more. Your local patient advice and liaison service (usually known as 'PALS') may be able to give you further information and support. You should also contact PALS if you are unhappy with the treatment you are offered, but you should talk about your care with a member of your healthcare team first. If your local PALS is not able to help you, they should refer you to your local independent complaints advocacy service.

NICE has also produced the following booklets, which you may find useful. They are available at [www.nice.org.uk](http://www.nice.org.uk) or from NICE publications (phone 0845 003 7783 or email [publications@nice.org.uk](mailto:publications@nice.org.uk) and quote the relevant reference number):

- 'Anakinra for rheumatoid arthritis' available from [www.nice.org.uk/TA72](http://www.nice.org.uk/TA72) (reference N0370)
- 'Rituximab for the treatment of rheumatoid arthritis' available from [www.nice.org.uk/TA126](http://www.nice.org.uk/TA126) (reference N1323)
- 'Adalimumab, etanercept and infliximab for rheumatoid arthritis' available from [www.nice.org.uk/TA130](http://www.nice.org.uk/TA130) (reference N1398)
- 'Abatacept for the treatment of rheumatoid arthritis' available from [www.nice.org.uk/TA141](http://www.nice.org.uk/TA141) (reference N1562)
- 'Osteoarthritis' available from [www.nice.org.uk/CG59](http://www.nice.org.uk/CG59) (reference N1460)

## About NICE

NICE produces guidance (advice) for the NHS about preventing, diagnosing and treating medical conditions. The guidance is written by independent experts including healthcare professionals and people representing patients and carers. They consider the evidence on the disease and treatments, the views of patients and carers and the experiences of doctors, nurses and other healthcare professionals. Staff working in the NHS are expected to follow this guidance.

*To find out more about NICE, its work and how it reaches decisions, see [www.nice.org.uk/aboutguidance](http://www.nice.org.uk/aboutguidance)*

*This booklet and other versions of the guideline aimed at healthcare professionals are available at [www.nice.org.uk/CG79](http://www.nice.org.uk/CG79). The versions for healthcare professionals contain more detailed information on the care and treatment you should be offered.*

*You can order printed copies of this booklet from NICE publications (phone 0845 003 7783 or email [publications@nice.org.uk](mailto:publications@nice.org.uk) and quote reference N1791).*

*We encourage NHS and voluntary organisations to use text from this booklet in their own information about rheumatoid arthritis.*