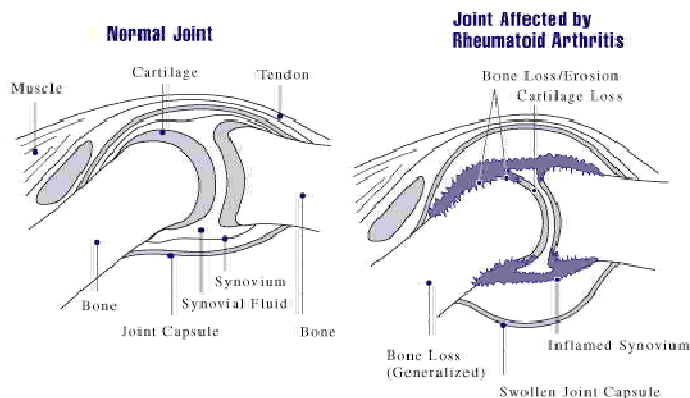


According to the Arthritis Foundation, rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is referred to as an autoimmune disease. The exact cause is not known but people with RA do have an immune system that turns against itself and begins attacking healthy tissue. The effects of rheumatoid arthritis can vary from person to person. A current belief is that RA isn't one disease but may be several different diseases that share commonalities. ([http://www.arthritis.org/disease-center.php?disease\\_id=31&df=effects](http://www.arthritis.org/disease-center.php?disease_id=31&df=effects)) Approximately 1.3 million people in the United States have rheumatoid arthritis (RA). It can affect anyone, including children. Onset usually occurs between 30 and 50 years of age. People with the genetic marker HLA-DR4 may have an increased risk of developing RA. This marker is found in white blood cells and plays a role in helping the body distinguish between its own cells and those of foreign invaders.

**Gender:** Women develop rheumatoid arthritis more often than men. Approximately seventy percent of people with RA are women. Interestingly, women with RA typically go into remission when they get pregnant, but then the symptoms more often increase in the year following pregnancy. Men appear to be more severely affected when they develop RA.

**Progression of RA:** 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, or pannus, 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" (Arthritis Foundation).



**Symptoms:** "Rheumatoid arthritis can start in any joint, but it most commonly begins in the smaller joints of the fingers, hands and wrists. Joint involvement is usually symmetrical, meaning that if a joint hurts on the left hand, the same joint will hurt on the right hand. In general, more joint erosion indicates more severe disease activity" (Arthritis Foundation). Other common physical symptoms include:

- § fatigue, muscle pain, and weakness.
- stiffness, particularly in the morning and lasting over 30 minutes, and when sitting for long periods of time.
- flu-like symptoms, including a low-grade fever.
- pain associated with prolonged sitting.
- flare up of disease activity followed by remission or disease inactivity.
- Rheumatoid nodules (lumps of tissue under the skin, typically on elbows) appear in about one-fifth of people with RA. (see above picture)
- loss of appetite, depression, weight loss, anemia, cold and/or sweaty hands and feet.
- involvement of the glands around the eyes and mouth, causing decreased production of tears and saliva (this is Sjögren's syndrome which is an arthritic disease).

**Diagnosis, Medications, Treatments, and Living with RA**, this site at the National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases provides a thorough explanation.

[http://www.niams.nih.gov/Health\\_Info/Rheumatic\\_Disease/default.asp#ra\\_17](http://www.niams.nih.gov/Health_Info/Rheumatic_Disease/default.asp#ra_17)

**Comment:** be suspicious of any health professional who promises a “cure.” Many therapies may help, but there is no cure for most kinds of arthritis and related diseases.

**Web Sites** to consider searching for information:

- § [http://www.arthritis.org/disease-center.php?disease\\_id=31&df=resources](http://www.arthritis.org/disease-center.php?disease_id=31&df=resources) offers suggestions for self-management techniques (e.g., exercise, stress management, relaxation and sleep) and combating depression.
- § <http://community.arthritis.org/community/raconnect.htm> (community resources)
- § American College of Rheumatology <http://www.rheumatology.org/practice/clinical/patients/index.asp>
- § Arthritis Foundation sites: <http://community.arthritis.org/community/raconnect.htm>; how diagnosed: [http://www.arthritis.org/disease\\_center.php?disease\\_id=31&df=diagnosed](http://www.arthritis.org/disease_center.php?disease_id=31&df=diagnosed)
- § Healthwise – Knowledgebase site at Peace Health <http://www.peacehealth.org/kbase/>
- § Mayo clinic: <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/rheumatoid-arthritis/DS00020>
- § <http://www.rheumatoidarthritis.com/understanding-ra/signs-and-symptoms.aspx>