

THE RUNDOWN

on Rheumatoid Arthritis

Once a highly debilitating disease, rheumatoid arthritis is now much more manageable if caught early, allowing people with the disease to avoid joint damage.

RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS (RA) is an autoimmune disease that causes inflammation, pain, stiffness and swelling in and around the joints—most commonly in the ankles, elbows, feet, hands, knees and wrists. Usually hands—or feet—on both sides of the body are affected.

Anyone can develop RA, although it is more prevalent in women. It is typically found in middle-aged and older people, but it also occurs in children and young adults. While the cause of the disease remains unknown, much progress in diagnosing and treating it has occurred during the last 20 years.

“Blood tests, ultrasound and MRIs [magnetic resonance imaging tests] help us make RA diagnoses earlier and more accurately than we used to, but there are still variations in testing that can render false-negative results,” says **Petros Efthimiou, M.D.**, associate chief of rheumatology at New York Methodist Hospital. “Because early detection of RA is essential to avoid permanent, painful joint damage, we can’t rely solely on these tests.”

People with prolonged arthritic complaints—morning stiffness lasting more than an hour after waking, arthritis in multiple joints or extreme fatigue—should see a rheumatologist for an RA evaluation. The earlier a diagnosis is made, the sooner that treatment can begin.

“We now have a better understanding of how the disease progresses,” Dr. Efthimiou says. “This has allowed the development of more targeted treatments that are both effective and safe and that stop inflammation before joints are irreversibly damaged.”

DO's and DON'Ts of Managing RA

DO eat an anti-inflammatory diet that incorporates antioxidant-rich, fresh vegetables and fruits, and lean protein including fish, nuts and olive oil. Avoid processed foods.

DON'T ignore recurring symptoms like pain, swelling and stiffness in joints that could signal the development of RA. See a doctor for evaluation.

DO participate in low-impact exercise like aerobics and swimming to relieve pain and inflammation.

DON'T rely solely on over-the-counter anti-inflammatory drugs. They may relieve pain, but they cannot prevent damage from RA. Being diagnosed and treated with prescription medications results in the best outcome for patients diagnosed with RA.

DO lead a healthy lifestyle and maintain a positive outlook to improve your resilience and overall well-being.

Treatment options include:

- + **RA-specific medications and disease-modifying anti-rheumatic drugs (DMARDs)** that work to relieve symptoms and alter disease development
- + **Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs)** to minimize inflammation and pain
- + **Corticosteroids** to provide quick relief for inflammation and pain
- + **Surgical procedures** like joint replacement surgery to help patients who have sustained permanent joint damage from RA to regain mobility and relieve pain.

“I cannot overemphasize the importance of early diagnosis,” Dr. Efthimiou says. “This disease is treatable, and with the right treatment, you can enjoy life without restrictions.”