

Rheumatoid Arthritis

Understanding Your Condition and Supporting Your Recovery

1 What Is Rheumatoid Arthritis?

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is an autoimmune condition — your immune system mistakenly attacks the lining of your joints (the synovium), causing inflammation, pain, and over time, damage to joint structures. Unlike osteoarthritis, which is wear-related, RA can affect people at any age and typically involves multiple joints symmetrically (both hands, both feet, both knees).

Feature	What It Means for You
Morning stiffness >1 hour	A hallmark of active RA — joints are stiff and swollen after rest; improves with gentle movement
Symmetrical joint involvement	Both sides affected simultaneously — feet, ankles, knees, wrists, and hands are common sites
Flares and remissions	RA follows a pattern of flares (increased activity) and quieter periods — rehab adapts to both
Systemic effects	Fatigue, anaemia, and low mood are common — these affect your capacity for exercise and recovery
Joint damage risk	Uncontrolled inflammation over time damages cartilage and bone — early treatment and movement are protective

2 Treatment Options

Treatment	How It Helps	What to Know
DMARDs (e.g. methotrexate)	Reduces immune system activity; slows joint damage	Takes weeks to work; regular blood monitoring required
Biologics (e.g. anti-TNF)	Targets specific immune pathways; highly effective for some	Used when DMARDs are insufficient; increases infection risk
NSAIDs / steroids	Reduces acute inflammation and pain during flares	Short-term relief only; not a substitute for DMARDs
Exercise & physiotherapy	Preserves joint function, reduces fatigue, supports mood	Safe and recommended even during mild-moderate flares

Orthotics & footwear	Offloads affected joints; reduces forefoot pressure and deformity progression	Custom orthotics are particularly effective for RA foot pain
----------------------	---	--

3 Exercise and Activity

Exercise does not damage rheumatoid joints — it protects them. Regular movement maintains muscle strength around joints, reduces fatigue, improves mood, and is one of the most evidence-supported self-management strategies for RA.

Type of Exercise	Benefit for RA	Getting Started
Low-impact aerobic (walking, cycling, swimming)	Reduces fatigue; improves cardiovascular health (RA increases cardiac risk)	20–30 min, 3–5x/week; pool-based is excellent during flares
Resistance/strength training	Preserves muscle mass around joints; reduces joint load	Start light; 2x/week; emphasise form over load
Flexibility and range of motion	Reduces morning stiffness; maintains joint movement	Daily gentle movement; best after a warm bath or light warm-up
Balance and proprioception	Reduces fall risk (increased in RA due to joint instability)	Single-leg standing, small balance boards — progress gradually

4 Managing Flares

Flare Management	Guidance
Keep moving — gently	Complete rest worsens stiffness. Gentle range-of-motion exercises are safe and beneficial during most flares
Reduce load — not activity	Swap high-impact for low-impact (walking to swimming, running to cycling) — maintain the habit
Cold therapy	Ice or cold packs for 10–15 min can reduce acute joint swelling and pain during flares
Contact your rheumatology team	Significant flares may require medication review — do not simply push through without clinical input
Pacing	Spread demanding tasks through the day; plan rest breaks; avoid the boom-bust cycle of overdoing on good days

5 Key Takeaways

KEY TAKEAWAY 1

RA is a systemic condition — not just joint pain. Fatigue, anaemia, and increased cardiovascular risk are all part of the picture. Your rehab programme should account for your overall health, not just the affected joints.

KEY TAKEAWAY 2

Movement is medicine — stay as active as you can. Exercise protects joints, reduces fatigue, and improves quality of life. Adapting your activity during flares is smart; stopping altogether is not.

KEY TAKEAWAY 3

Orthotics and footwear matter for RA feet. The feet are among the most commonly affected areas in RA. Custom orthotics reduce forefoot pressure, support deforming joints, and can significantly reduce pain — ask your clinician whether this is appropriate for you.