

RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS INFORMATION SHEET

Rheumatoid arthritis is a long-term condition that causes pain, swelling and stiffness in the joints. The hands, feet and wrists are commonly affected, but it can also cause problems in other parts of the body. There may be periods where your symptoms become worse, known as a flare-up or flare. A flare can be difficult to predict, but with treatment it is possible to decrease the number of flares and minimize or prevent long-term damage to the joints.

Why should I attend my annual rheumatoid arthritis review?

Having rheumatoid arthritis can lead to several other conditions that may cause additional symptoms and can sometimes be life-threatening. Possible complications include carpal tunnel syndrome, inflammation of other areas of the body (such as the lungs, heart and eyes), and an increased risk of heart attacks and strokes. Ensuring that rheumatoid arthritis is well controlled helps reduce your risk of complications such as these.

Your review appointment is a regular opportunity to pick up any problems at an early stage and to discuss changes to your lifestyle and treatment, which will benefit you. You can also raise any questions or concerns you have about your health and medication.

What will happen at my appointment?

The nurse will discuss your condition with you and ask specific questions to find out if you are having any problems. She will ask about your lifestyle and your medication and check your height and weight, along with your blood pressure. She will also perform some blood tests. She will then be able to advise you about any changes she would recommend. If needed, she will refer you to a doctor for further review.

What lifestyle changes will help me?

- Stopping smoking will help to reduce your risk of developing cardiovascular disease as well as COPD and cancer. You can get help and support from 0800 052 5855 and www.smokefree.nhs.uk
- Reducing your intake of foods high in saturated fat such as butter, cheese, cakes and biscuits. Small amounts of unsaturated fat has benefits e.g. oily fish, avocados, seeds.
- Increasing your regular exercise if needed. Advice can be obtained from www.prescription4exercise.com
- Weight loss if your BMI is greater than 25
- Reducing your alcohol intake to less than 14 units a week for women and 21 units a week for men. For help and support contact 0300 555 5999 and www.bdaat.co.uk

What tests may help me?

- Diabetes screen – if you are diabetic this increases the likelihood of developing cardiovascular disease.
- Cholesterol measurement – high cholesterol increases the risk of cardiovascular disease.
- Blood pressure measurement – high blood pressure is a risk factor for cardiovascular disease.
- Blood tests to look at kidney and liver function and a full blood count – particularly important if you are taking disease modifying antirheumatic drugs (DMARDs) such as methotrexate and Sulphasalazine.

What treatments may help me?

- Painkillers such as paracetamol and codeine.
- Anti-inflammatories such as ibuprofen and steroids to reduce the joint inflammation.
- DMARDs such as Methotrexate, Hydroxychloroquine and Sulphasalazine to try and stop the rheumatoid from getting worse.
- Biological treatments – injections prescribed by specialists to try and stop the rheumatoid from getting worse.
- Supportive therapies such as physiotherapy and occupational therapy.
- Complimentary therapies may offer short term benefits.