

# Inflammatory and Rheumatoid Arthritis

## What you're feeling

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You may notice pain and swelling in your joints, often in your hands, wrists, or feet. This discomfort can feel like a deep ache or a sharp sting. It might stay in one spot for months or years without you realizing why. You may find that certain movements become difficult. Reaching behind your back to fasten a bra can feel stiff. Tucking in your shirt might pull at your sides. Lifting objects can feel heavier than usual.

The pain often changes throughout the day. It may be worse when you first wake up in the morning. Your joints might feel stiff and hard to move. This stiffness usually improves as you get more active during the day. However, pushing too hard can make the pain flare up again later. You might also feel pain at night, which can disrupt your sleep. Sleeping on the affected side can put extra pressure on inflamed joints, making it hard to find a comfortable position.

In some cases, you might experience swelling around your ankles. This can cause intermittent symptoms that come and go. You may not notice it right away because the pain is not constant. It can linger for a long time before you connect it to your overall health. Your doctor will look for these signs to understand how the condition is affecting you.

Living with inflammatory arthritis means managing these ups and downs. You might have good days where you feel normal, followed by days where simple tasks feel challenging. Understanding these patterns helps your care team support you better. They can adjust your treatment to help reduce pain and improve your daily function. You are not alone in this experience. Many people with rheumatoid arthritis face similar challenges. With the right care, you can find ways to manage the symptoms and stay active.

## What's actually happening

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Your immune system is a defense network that usually fights off germs. In rheumatoid arthritis, it mistakenly attacks your own joints. It treats the smooth lining of your joint as if it were an invader. This causes the lining to swell and become inflamed. The swelling creates pressure and pain. Over time, this inflammation damages the cartilage and bone inside the joint.

Cartilage is the smooth coating on the ends of your bones. It acts like a shock absorber in a car. It lets your bones glide past each other without friction. The inflammation eats away at this protective layer. Without it, the

bones rub together directly. This causes stiffness, grinding sensations, and significant pain. The joint capsule, which is the sleeve around the joint, also thickens. This further restricts your movement and makes daily tasks harder.

This process is different from wear-and-tear arthritis. In wear-and-tear arthritis, the damage comes from age and use. In rheumatoid arthritis, the damage comes from an active internal attack. This is why your doctor considers your overall health carefully. Patients with rheumatoid arthritis face higher risks of complications after surgery compared to those with simple wear-and-tear arthritis. The inflammation can affect healing and increase the chance of needing revision surgery.

Your doctor looks at the whole picture. They consider how the disease affects your bones and soft tissues. They also look at your other health conditions. For example, rheumatoid arthritis can weaken bones, leading to osteoporosis. This makes the bone structure less stable. Your treatment plan addresses both the joint damage and the underlying immune response. The goal is to stop the attack, relieve pain, and restore function safely.

## What we can do about it

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Start with self-care and movement. Gentle exercise and physiotherapy help keep your joints flexible and strong. This routine aims to reduce stiffness and maintain your daily function. Give these methods a fair trial for several weeks. Consistency matters more than intensity. Listen to your body and adjust activities to avoid pain.

Medical management focuses on controlling inflammation and protecting your bones. Your doctor may prescribe pain medication and anti-inflammatories to ease discomfort. For patients with rheumatoid arthritis and osteoporosis, denosumab helps maintain bone health and prevents joint damage. If you take biologic disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs, continuing them around the time of elective hand surgery does not significantly increase the risk of wound healing failures or surgical site infections. Your doctor will provide internet-derived information on treatment options to help you make informed decisions during counseling.

If symptoms remain severe despite these steps, seek specialist input. A doctor may refer you for further assessment. In some cases, a procedure may be considered to restore function. For example, total hip arthroplasty can reduce pain and improve outcomes similar to those seen in osteoarthritis patients. Total knee arthroplasty also yields significant improvements in both physician-reported and patient-reported outcomes. However, be aware that rheumatoid arthritis can affect surgical results differently depending on the joint. Total elbow arthroplasty carries higher long-term revision rates in rheumatoid arthritis compared to non-rheumatoid cases. Total shoulder arthroplasty is associated with higher rates of systemic and joint-related complications in inflammatory arthritis. Total ankle arthroplasty may result in poorer patient-reported outcomes compared to other arthritis types, though functional improvement from baseline is still expected. Your doctor will weigh these risks and benefits to determine the best path forward for your specific condition.

## When to see someone

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See your GP if you have persistent pain that does not improve with rest. Ask for a specialist review if you notice weakness or instability in your joints. Seek help if your joints lock or give way during use. Contact your doctor

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Dr Kieran Hirpara – Specialist Orthopaedic Surgeon  
Suite 2, Level 1, Mater Private Hospital Rockhampton, 31 Ward Street, The Range, QLD 4700  
Phone 07 4863 6556 · office@cqupperlimb.com.au · cqupperlimb.com.au

if symptoms interfere with your sleep or work. Sudden worsening of your condition is also a reason to seek care. Be aware that chronic inflammation in areas like the ankle may cause intermittent symptoms that go unrecognized for months or years. Early evaluation helps manage these changes effectively.