



Physiotherapists:  
The Body Specialists

# Physio Tips

## RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS

### Physiotherapy Association of BC

#### RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS

Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA) is a chronic disease that is characterized by an inflammation in the lining of the joints. While it can affect many joints in the body, RA most commonly affects the hands and feet. RA is also characterized by its symmetrical pattern – the same joints on both sides of the body become inflamed.

The Arthritis Society estimates that about 300,000 Canadians have RA. Although it can affect people of all ages, it most commonly develops between the ages of 25 and 50. Twice as many women than men will develop the disease.

While the cause of RA is unknown, the inflammation occurs when the body's own immune system fails to 'recognize' the soft tissue and tries to destroy it as if it were foreign matter. This process is continuous and results in damage to cartilage, bones, tendons and ligaments. This in turn can lead to permanent joint deformity and significant disability. In some cases, there is damage to organs such as eyes, lungs or heart. The onset of RA varies from a gradual increase in symptoms to a sudden, severe attack. Some people experience periodic flare-ups in symptoms while others are always in pain and the disease progresses over time.

#### SYMPTOMS of RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS

The Arthritis Society lists the following as early symptoms of RA:

- Pain, swelling, heat or redness in a joint, usually the joints of the hands or feet;
- Morning stiffness lasting longer than 30 minutes;
- Pain in three or more joints;
- Pain in a joint all night;
- Pain in the same joints on both sides of the body;
- Low energy and fatigue;
- Possible fever and weight loss.

#### TREATMENT OF RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS

There is no cure for Rheumatoid Arthritis but there are effective ways to manage the symptoms and any resulting disabilities. Treatment of RA includes medicine, exercise, and education on joint protection and lifestyle changes. In some cases, surgery is required when joints are too severely damaged. Once the diagnosis of RA is made, a multidisciplinary healthcare team, including a family physician, rheumatologist, social worker, dietitian, occupational therapist and physiotherapist will work to find the most effective treatment plan for the individual.

Physiotherapists can help reduce the pain and disability caused by RA. A physiotherapist will conduct a detailed assessment and prescribe a treatment plan that may include:

- Specific therapeutic modalities or hydrotherapy;
- A targeted exercise program that will improve or maintain joint mobility and help decrease joint pain by strengthening the muscles surrounding them; and
- Recommendations for the use of assistive device such as mobility aids or splints to reduce unnecessary stress and pain.

Physiotherapists are experts in movement and mobility, body mechanics, muscles and joints. They will help develop an exercise program specially-tailored to your needs, putting together the right combination of activities to improve physical fitness and avoid injury.



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