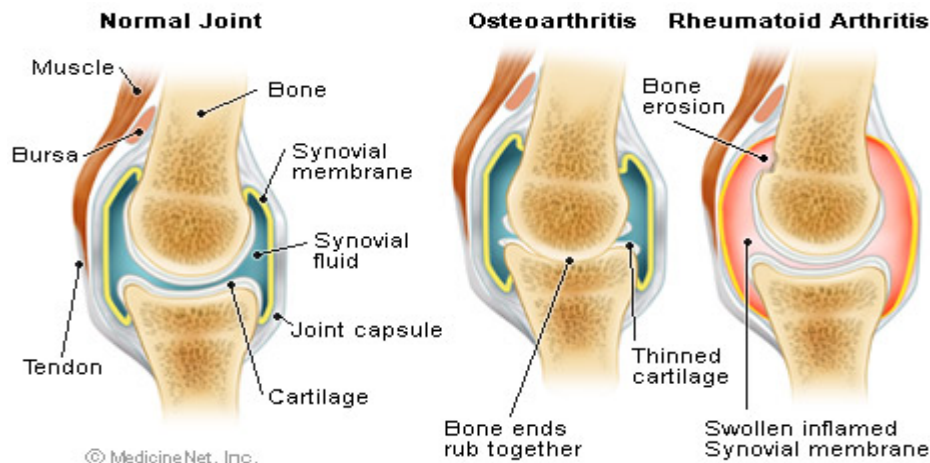


## Rheumatoid Arthritis

### What is rheumatoid arthritis?

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is an autoimmune disease; a disorder in which the body's immune system attacks its own tissues. This causes an inflammation in the lining of the joints, which leads to redness, pain and swelling.



### Normal and Arthritic Joints

Many joints, but in particular, the small joints of the fingers, wrists, ankles, and feet are affected. It can also affect other parts of the body, such as the eyes, lungs or heart.

A person with RA may experience periods of flare-ups, followed by periods of remissions. While symptomatic, fluid accumulates in the affected joints, causing swelling and inflammation.

This disease can cause severe damage, leading to joint deformity and disability. Although not all cases of RA will progress to this crippling stage, all cases are accompanied by pain and restriction of joint movement.

### How common is rheumatoid arthritis?

- It affects 300,000 (1 in 100) Canadians.
- RA affects women three times more often than men.
- Most people develop RA between the ages of 25 and 50.

### What can you do about your rheumatoid arthritis?

Establishing the correct diagnosis early is very important. Your doctor and physiotherapist can then choose the appropriate treatment and help minimize the chances of developing disability or deformity.

## Medical options include:

- Choosing the appropriate medication for controlling pain and inflammation.
- Corticosteroid injections.
- Reconstructive surgery, ranging from removing damaged joint tissue to realigning joints or rebuilding parts of the joint.
- Joint replacement surgery – this is done to replace severely damaged joints, most often joint of the hands.



## What Physiotherapy can do to help

- We teach exercises to improve muscle strength and thus help to protect and stabilize joint and prevent pain.
- We teach range of motion exercises to help stop further loss of movement and to relieve stiffness.
- We use electrotherapy and/or acupuncture for pain relief.
- We educate you on how to manage your condition, such as ways to protect and stabilize your joints with positioning and splints.

## Protecting your joints

- Protecting your joints means using your joints in ways that avoid excessive mechanical stress in daily tasks.
- Maintaining a healthy weight avoids putting excess stress on your joints.
- Avoid excess stress during activity. This can be done by alternating easy tasks with more difficult, heavy tasks. Taking breaks allows weakened muscles to recover.
- Avoid staying in one position for a long period of time. Movement of the joints increases their lubrication, thus decreasing stiffness.
- You may be given splints that help your joints rest in a good position, thus avoiding excess stress.
- Daily tasks can be simplified by using assistive devices such as raised chairs, grip and reaching aids, and grab bars.

Although the course of RA is variable, most people are able to maintain an active lifestyle. With the combined benefits of medication, balancing exercise and rest, and employing joint protection techniques, most people are able to manage the disease well.