



## Living Well With a Rheumatic Disease

If you were recently diagnosed with arthritis or one of the other rheumatic diseases, you may be feeling anxious, even a little overwhelmed. This is a natural response to an unexpected turn in the road.

How do you handle your very real concerns? By knowing the facts.

First, the reality. With proper treatment, you can manage this condition and still have a good and productive life. There are numerous medications that have been proven effective and expert health professionals who will help.

However, you also have to take control of the situation. That means making sure you get adequate exercise, ample rest and good nutrition. It also means learning about this disease and taking steps to address your own needs.

The knowledge you acquire and the positive approach you take to your new lifestyle will make the difference between just coping with rheumatic disease and living well, despite your diagnosis.

### Fast facts

- You are not alone. An estimated 43 million people in the United States of all ages and genders have arthritis or other rheumatic conditions.
- Many rheumatic diseases are chronic conditions. They are unlikely to go away.
- There may not be a cure for your condition, but effective management is available for most.
- Many people with rheumatic disease lead happy, satisfying lives year after year.

### What is rheumatic disease?

Arthritis and other rheumatic diseases are a family of illnesses that can cause inflammation (redness, swelling and pain), changes in the joints and pain in the surrounding structures. They also may make it



difficult to do daily activities. In fact, there are more than 100 different rheumatic conditions including, but not limited to, [osteoporosis](#), [rheumatoid arthritis](#), [gout](#), [fibromyalgia](#), [osteoarthritis](#), [systemic lupus erythematosus](#), and [scleroderma](#).

While the symptoms may vary, as a rule, these conditions target the musculoskeletal system, including the bones, joints, muscles, and tendons that contribute to function. Some people also can have internal organ involvement or even more than one of these conditions at the same time.

Therefore, it may take time for your primary care physician, rheumatologist, or other health care professional to determine your particular diagnosis and the best treatment approach for you. Your participation in this effort—and your patience—will make a substantial contribution to a successful diagnosis and your comfort levels.

### What can you do? Make your medical visit count!

Plan ahead for your visits with your health care provider and, above all, communicate.

- Arrive with a list of your specific concerns.
- Consider bringing someone with you who can listen to the health care provider and take notes as appropriate.
- Respond to the medical professional's queries honestly and directly.
- Talk about your emotions, stress or discomfort if they are interfering with your lifestyle.
- Ask for a clearer explanation if you don't understand any recommended treatment, including benefits, instructions and duration.
- Ask about where to find reliable sources of information to learn more about your condition and about community resources
- Feel free to ask questions about the cost and side effects of medications, treatments or other points discussed.

### Seek information

Make a concerted effort to learn more about your condition and how best to cope with it. Augment the information health care professionals provide with the wealth of additional resources available including:

- The [Arthritis Foundation](#). The national office and many local chapters offer classes, books, videos and free informational brochures on self-management, water and exercise programs, and other important topics.
- Other rheumatic disease organizations, including the ones [listed here](#).

### Find help and resources

Identify the team of medical professionals who will be of the most benefit to you. Initially, your rheumatologist, who has special training in the diagnosis and treatment of rheumatic diseases, will probably work closely with your primary care provider. Once you are diagnosed, a number of other medical care providers are available to help you manage your condition, including:

- Nurses
- Physical therapists
- Occupational therapists
- Pharmacists

- Health educators
- Social workers
- Psychologists
- Orthopedic surgeons
- Nurse practitioners/physician assistants

### Get Involved

Rather than giving your rheumatic condition control over your life, get involved. Take an active role in planning your care. Ask questions. Work with your rheumatologist and medical team to decide the treatments that work best for you. Make a point to learn more about:

- Your medications
- Exercise programs
- Relaxation and pain management
- Joint protection
- Balancing rest and activity
- Nutrition and weight control
- Managing stress

### Talk to others

For personal reinforcement, find support groups where you can talk, share and interact with others. Check with your doctor or health professional about community volunteer groups in your area that can provide additional input and assistance.

Then make a difference on a national level. Join the [Advocates for Arthritis Program](#) organized by the American College of

Rheumatology, a network of members and patients who are apprised of important votes taking place in Congress which affect patient care, the practice of rheumatology, and federal funding of rheumatology research. You can help generate support for research and lobbying efforts that enhance the quality of life for patients just like you.

### Maintain a positive attitude

Believe it or not, your attitude will make a difference. Meeting your treatment and your new situation half way redirects your energies into success.

- Be flexible and open to treatment choices.
- Find new ways to continue enjoying your favorite activities.
- Be positive.
- Communicate openly and encourage others to do the same.
- Remember it's OK to ask for help.
- Keep your sense of humor.

### Remain active

Not interested in exercising? Think again. Exercising can help decrease pain, reduce disease symptoms and make a substantial contribution to your overall flexibility. Plus, it will improve your mental outlook!



Make a point to learn more about your medications.



Pick a group of exercises that contribute to improved fitness and strength. There are various activities that can be included in an exercise program, such as walking, water aerobics, bicycling or dancing. Join friends, take along a book on tape or just get going. The trick is getting started and developing a routine. If the exercise path you are taking is strenuous, check with your physician first.

### **Don't give up**

Give yourself the time you need to get better. Don't feel guilty about asking your family, friends, and colleagues for the support you need to get your rest, exercise, and medical care. Learn to say no to outside commitments when you need to, so that you can focus on getting well. Many people with chronic illness feel low, discouraged, or even overwhelmed at times. Make sure you get the support you need through your friends, family, church, and/or counselors to cope with the illness.

Above all, don't give up! Yes, this is a chronic condition and, no, it may not go away. But many, many patients with rheumatic diseases lead happy, fulfilling lives by learning, communicating, sharing, and taking a positive approach to coping with change. Why not be one of those individuals? Take control over how you live with rheumatic disease.

### **To find a rheumatologist**

For a listing of rheumatologists in your area, [click here](#).

Learn more about [rheumatologists](#) and [rheumatology health professionals](#).

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This information was prepared by the Association of Rheumatology Health Professionals, a Division of the American College of Rheumatology. It is a professional membership society composed of individuals from a variety of disciplines who share an interest in rheumatology-related issues of practice, education and research.

*This patient fact sheet is provided for general education only. Individuals should consult a qualified health care provider for professional medical advice, diagnosis and treatment of a medical or health condition.*

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