



## RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS

### ABOUT

Unlike the wear-and-tear damage of Osteoarthritis, Rheumatoid Arthritis is an autoimmune disease that largely affects the hand and wrist. In Rheumatoid Arthritis, your immune system targets the cells that line and help lubricate the joint known as the synovium. This lining becomes swollen, inflamed and thickened, which begins to erode the joint.

The swollen tissue may also stretch and weaken the surrounding structures such as tendons and ligaments which are the connective tissues that hold the bones together, resulting in deformity and instability. In severe cases of Rheumatoid Arthritis, tendons may rupture (break). Rheumatoid Arthritis can occur at any age but is most commonly diagnosed between the ages of 35 and 65 years, and is more common in women than men. There is no cure for the condition. If poorly managed, the condition can be highly disabling as this can lead to progressive and irreversible joint damage and a loss of function. Therefore, it is beneficial to seek treatment as soon as possible to help reduce and slow down the effects of the condition.

### SYMPTOMS

The symptoms of Rheumatoid Arthritis vary from person to person. The most common symptoms are:

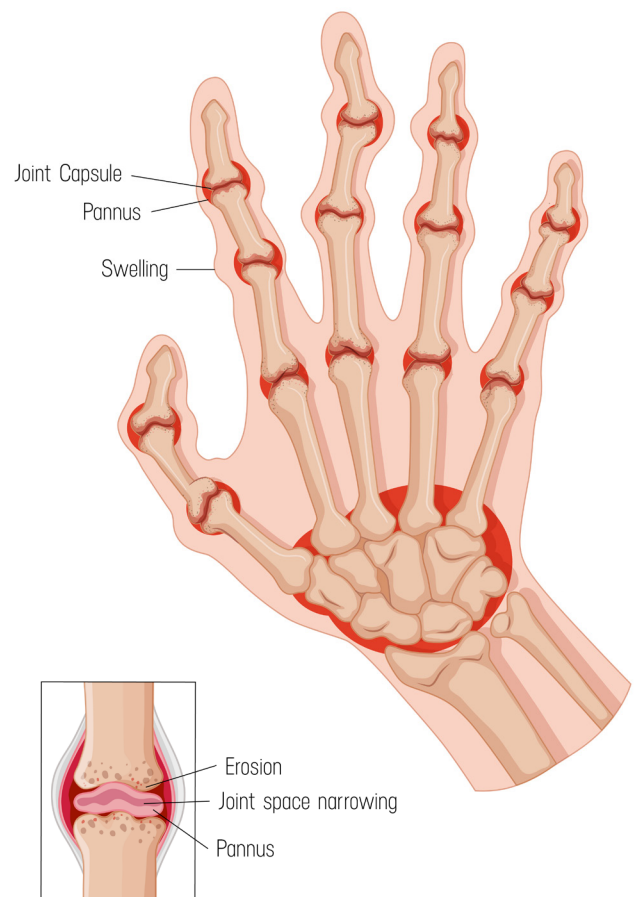
- Joint pain, swelling, and tenderness to touch the affected joint
- Stiffness of the joints, especially in the morning
- Symmetrical (both sides of the body are affected)

#### **In chronic cases there can be:**

- A shift in the position of the fingers as they drift towards the small finger
- Swelling and inflammation of the tendons that help bend the fingers, resulting in triggering/locking of the finger as it bends. Some patients will also note numbness, tingling and pain in the fingers
- Rupture (breaking) of tendons
- Unstable joints in the wrist, fingers, and thumb

After some time there are characteristic changes with different types of arthritis, which are visible on x-ray. Other investigations such as blood tests may also be helpful in confirming the diagnosis of an inflammatory arthritis.

### RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS OF THE HAND



# HOW HAND THERAPY CAN HELP

With symptoms such as pain, fatigue, stiffness and decreased muscle strength, the impact on an individual with Rheumatoid Arthritis is quite extensive. Hand therapy is aimed at reducing pain and swelling, preventing further joint damage whilst maximising movement, strength and hand function.

Joint protection and energy conservation strategies are some of the best ways to help reduce the overall impact that Rheumatoid Arthritis has on your joints. By changing the way that you perform a task you can:

- Reduce pain during activity
- Lower the stress on your joints
- Reduce inflammation and swelling
- Improve fatigue

This assists in helping to preserve the integrity of the joint. An example would be to break down an activity that aggravates your symptoms into smaller tasks. These smaller tasks are then spread out over a longer period of time, allowing the body to rest between each task.

A therapist can provide and/or suggest equipment that can help place less strain on the affected joints making daily tasks such as food preparation, showering/bathing and being able to dress yourself, much easier and less painful to perform. A common example is to bulk up cutlery handles which can assist an individual to be more independent with their meals.

Splinting for the hand and wrist is another option that a therapist can offer to help manage the pain associated with Rheumatoid Arthritis. By placing the joint in a better anatomical position, it will help to support the joint, reduce joint destruction and prevent further deformity. Orthoses (supports) are custom made to the individual and can be made of either thermoplastic or neoprene.

An exercise program can help to maintain movement, prevent deformity and reduce load on the affected joint, all helping to reduce pain and inflammation. This is tailored by a therapist to best address any areas of concern and is important in helping to empower the individual to self-manage their condition.



*HAND THERAPY IS THE  
ART AND SCIENCE OF  
REHABILITATION FOR THE UPPER  
LIMB - SHOULDER TO HAND*

*The Australian Hand Therapy  
Association provides support  
for its members through  
continuing education, professional  
development, networking and  
representation at  
state and national levels.*

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