

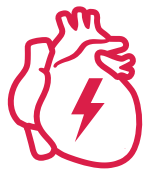
Caring For Your Heart

If You Have
Rheumatoid Arthritis

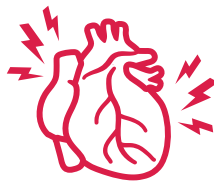
If you have rheumatoid arthritis (RA), you may be at greater risk for heart disease.

Heart disease is the leading cause of death for adults in the United States. People with RA are **1.5 to 2 times** more likely to get heart disease.

Swollen and painful joints can overshadow other RA symptoms. However, **the chronic inflammation that comes with RA can also be dangerous for the heart** and linked to other health conditions like high blood pressure and metabolic syndrome.



Having RA may make it up to **2 times more likely** to get heart disease



Heart disease is a big reason why RA **increases risk for death by about 50%**

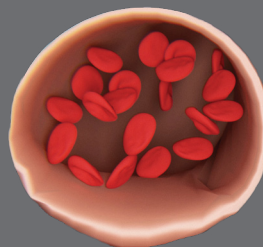


Managing RA flare-ups may **help prevent heart disease**

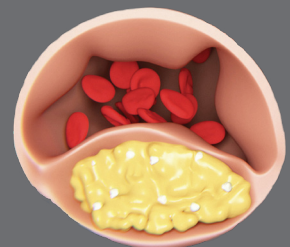
It is important to talk with both your rheumatologist and primary care doctor about your heart health.

What is heart disease?

“Heart disease” is often used to refer to coronary artery disease (CAD), the most common form of heart disease. It’s caused when fatty deposits narrow the arteries that supply blood to the heart. **CAD can cause heart attacks and sudden death**, but there are things you can do that may help lower your risk.



Healthy artery



Artery developing fatty deposits

Talk with your doctors about ways to help manage your risk for heart disease by:



Managing your RA symptoms



Adopting healthy habits



Understanding why RA may put you at increased risk for heart disease

Regularly seeing a primary care doctor as well as a rheumatologist is important for heart health.

The connection between RA and heart disease

Experts are still looking at why RA is linked to heart disease. RA itself seems to increase risk for heart disease, and so do some other health conditions that tend to be linked to RA. (See pages 4 and 5 for more information.)

Chronic inflammation from RA can lead to heart disease.

Inflammation, the kind that lasts years, is often a risk factor shared by people with RA and those with heart disease. **RA can damage and harden blood vessels.** Damaged blood vessels make it easier for fatty deposits to build up. These buildups can decrease blood flow to the heart and cause heart disease.

Certain risk factors for heart disease are common among people with RA:



High Blood Pressure

Research shows that medicines like steroids and NSAIDs used to treat RA can raise blood pressure (hypertension). Also, RA symptoms may make it more difficult to exercise. **Not getting enough exercise can lead to high blood pressure.**

According to the American Heart Association (AHA), high blood pressure can damage artery walls. This may help fatty deposits build up and eventually cause heart disease or a heart attack.

NSAID = nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug.

It is important to **talk with your doctor about your blood pressure** and what you can do to help manage it.



Abnormal Cholesterol Levels

People with RA tend to have abnormal cholesterol levels.

This can be even more true during RA flare-ups, which can lower cholesterol.

Having low levels of LDL “bad” cholesterol is good. However, the AHA says that **having low levels of the beneficial HDL cholesterol can put you at risk.** HDL cholesterol protects the heart by removing unhealthy blood fats from the body.

People with RA also tend to have high levels of triglycerides. The combination of high triglycerides and low HDL cholesterol can be especially harmful for heart and blood vessel health.

LDL = low-density lipoprotein;
HDL = high-density lipoprotein.

Taking an RA medication **may increase your HDL “good” cholesterol**, which may help protect your heart.

⋮ **Talk with your doctor about these risk factors and how they can be managed.**



Metabolic Syndrome

According to the National Institutes of Health, a person has metabolic syndrome when they have **at least 3 of these** common risk factors:

- High blood pressure
- A large waistline or having an “apple” shape
- High triglycerides
- Low HDL cholesterol
- High fasting blood sugar

Having RA makes you **up to 45% more likely** to develop metabolic syndrome.

RA can reduce muscle mass and increase fat deposits, making you less sensitive to insulin and raising blood sugar levels. High blood sugar can damage the heart’s blood vessels and nerves, narrow arteries, and make it easier for abnormal clots to form in the blood. According to the NHLBI, these problems can lead to a heart attack, stroke, or death.

NHLBI = National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute.



Shared Risk Factors

Some factors increase risk for both RA and heart disease. Two that can be changed are:

Smoking—People who smoke are **1.3 to 2 times more likely to develop RA**. Smoking can cause RA flare-ups and prevent RA medications from working as well. Smoking can damage blood vessels and lead to high blood pressure.

According to the CDC, **your risk for heart disease increases the more you smoke**. However, no safe amount of smoking exists.

People with RA who smoke are about **50% more likely** to develop cardiovascular conditions like heart attack and stroke.

Obesity—According to the CDC, **risk for developing RA increases with being overweight**. While RA can make physical activity more difficult, gentle exercise and healthy eating can help with weight and lower risk for heart disease.

CDC = Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Some healthy steps that may help lower your risk for heart disease

According to the CDC, there are other risk factors that can harm the heart. Some of these include physical inactivity, poor diet, and experiencing a lot of stress.

Talk with your doctor about what you can do to help manage your risk for heart disease. Some lifestyle changes your doctor may recommend include:



Stay active

Regular exercise may protect the blood vessels, boost the “good” HDL cholesterol, and lower risk for heart disease. **Exercise may also help reduce inflammation.**



Eat a healthy diet

The CDC recommends eating fruits, vegetables, and foods high in omega-3 and limiting saturated and trans fats. This diet may **help lower heart disease and reduce inflammation.**

The American Heart Association (AHA) suggests following the **Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension (DASH) diet.** **See the back of this brochure** for more information.



Lower stress levels

The National Institutes of Health recommends using relaxation techniques like **deep breathing and meditation** to help lower stress levels. The AHA says that **spending time outdoors** or looking at nature can also help reduce stress.



Quit smoking

Your doctor may prescribe nicotine replacement, medication, and/or counseling.



Know your numbers

Ask your doctor about how often you should have your blood pressure, cholesterol levels, and blood sugar level measured. The National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute recommends having regular screenings for these levels.

Talk with your doctors

It is important to talk about your heart health with both your rheumatologist and your primary care doctor. **Managing RA-related inflammation may help lower your risk for heart disease.**

Ask your primary care doctor about how often you should have a heart health screening.

The American Heart Association recommends adults 20 years of age and older have a **cholesterol test every 4 to 6 years**. You may need these screenings more often if you have RA. **Your doctor may suggest cholesterol screening** after you start a new medication. Being tested when you don't have much inflammation may give your doctor accurate information.

See your doctor right away if you have:

- Chest pain that comes and goes with stress
- Shortness of breath
- A new decreased ability to exercise
- Increased risk factors for heart disease

Your doctor may recommend an imaging test to check your heart. **It is important for heart disease to be treated as early as possible.**

Women are more likely to have RA and may experience different signs of heart disease than men

It's important for women with RA to know that heart disease or heart attack symptoms can look different for women than for men. **Only about 3 in 5 women experience chest pain.** Some women may experience signs like these:

- Neck, jaw, or shoulder pain
- Pain in the upper abdomen or back
- Nausea and/or vomiting
- Fatigue



Talk with your doctor



If you think you may be at risk for heart disease because of RA or other factors, talk with your doctor. They may suggest lifestyle changes or a test to check your heart.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To learn more about how lifestyle changes may help lower your risk for heart disease, check out these resources.



Mind Your Heart

This website provides information about heart disease and heart-healthy living.



DASH Eating Plan: Healthy Eating Proven Results

This publication from the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute teaches about the DASH diet.