



CONDITION

What is Rheumatoid Arthritis?

The word 'arthritis' simply means inflammation inside a joint. There are two large subgroups of arthritis; osteoarthritis and inflammatory arthritis.

What causes arthritis?

Osteoarthritis is the commonest type of arthritis and is a mechanical wearing out of the joint surfaces. As the joint wears and becomes less smooth the surrounding tissues become irritated and inflamed causing pain in the joint. Certain patterns of osteoarthritis can run in families. Fractures or injuries that involve the bones or joints may also increase the risk of this sort of arthritis developing.

Inflammatory arthritis starts with inflammation within the joint lining. This inflammation then produces chemicals which attack and damage the bony surfaces causing the joint to wear out. The original cause of the inflamed lining is not always completely clear. Factors implicated in causing this sort of arthritis include the immune system, your genes and various environmental stimuli such as infections. Rheumatoid arthritis is the commonest type of inflammatory arthritis and is thought to be largely caused by the immune system. The inflammatory process can also affect tendons, the soft tissues around the joints and other organs in the body.

What are the signs and symptoms?

Common symptoms from an arthritic joint include pain, swelling and stiffness. Rheumatoid arthritis is often worse in the morning with patients describing an hour or two of severe stiffness, during which time they have to "warm up" their joints. A symmetrical pattern of joint involvement is also characteristic of rheumatoid arthritis.

After some time there are characteristic changes visible on x-ray with different types of arthritis. Rheumatoid arthritis is being diagnosed earlier and earlier these days, often before any bony changes are visible on the x-rays. Early structural changes are sometimes seen on more detailed images such as those of an MRI scan (magnetic resonance imaging or magnet scan).

Other investigations such as blood tests may also be helpful in confirming the diagnosis of an inflammatory arthritis. Blood tests are normal in simple mechanical osteoarthritis.

What is the treatment?

It is important to try and keep any arthritic joint as mobile as possible and to use the muscles around the joint, as these help support the joint movements. During periods when the joint is very inflamed it is often helpful to rest the joint for a brief period. Various removable splints are available to support the hand, thumb and wrist for this purpose. Cold compresses are sometimes useful but some patients also find warmth relieves their symptoms.

Painkillers can be helpful in controlling the symptoms of arthritis and allow the joint to keep moving and functioning.

Certain activities, particularly involving the hand, may be assisted by gadgets and devices which reduce the effort required to do a particular task, turning on taps and opening jam jars are good examples.

Drug treatments, designed to damp down the overactive immune system of patients with rheumatoid arthritis, have transformed the treatment of this condition in the last 20 years. You may well already have been referred to a Consultant Rheumatologist for detailed advice regarding this sort of treatment.

Surgery can be useful in managing the complications and long term mechanical consequences of rheumatoid arthritis. Within the hand, wrist and elbow surgery can help relieve compression of nerves, avoid damage and rupture of inflamed tendons and deal with damaged joints. The most well known type of surgery is joint replacement, but many other options are available and your Surgeon will discuss these with you as appropriate.