

Patient Information

Inflammatory Arthritis

Department of Rheumatology



What is arthritis?

Arthritis is a condition which causes pain and swelling of the joints. There are many different forms. The most common is osteoarthritis (also known as degenerative arthritis) which is a form of joint 'wear and tear' which most people usually develop as they get older.

Patients sometimes develop another form of arthritis known as inflammatory arthritis. Examples of this include: rheumatoid arthritis; psoriatic arthritis; reactive arthritis and enteropathic arthritis. Inflammatory types of arthritis are auto-immune conditions. This means that they are caused by joints being attacked by the body's immune system. The immune system's normal role is to fight infection and, for reasons we don't fully understand, it attacks joints instead, causing inflammatory arthritis.

The Early Arthritis Clinic specialises in managing inflammatory types of arthritis.

What treatments can I have?

The treatments used to treat inflammatory arthritis include pain killers, anti-inflammatory medication and short courses of steroids. You may have had some of these treatments already from your GP. These treatments are rarely enough and additional treatment with immunosuppressive drugs known as **DMARDs** is often needed.

DMARDs suppress parts of the immune system thought to cause arthritis. Studies have shown that DMARDs are most useful when used in combination at an early stage of arthritis. In the Early Arthritis Clinic we aim to start treatment, usually with two DMARDs, as soon as the diagnosis has been confirmed. Information about each individual DMARD is provided in a separate leaflet.

Do the treatments have any side effects?

DMARDs do have some side effects and anyone starting treatment is closely monitored with blood tests (please see separate leaflet).

DMARDs are immunosuppressants and may need to be stopped temporarily if you develop a significant infection. Not all patients get side effects.

What should I expect from these treatments?

Although we cannot cure inflammatory arthritis, we aim to bring about remission. This means that you should feel back to normal and be able to carry out day-to-day activities without any significant limitation whilst remaining on long term DMARD therapy.

DMARDs work slowly and it can take several months before you notice an improvement but we hope to get on top of your arthritis as soon as possible by starting treatment early and quickly increasing the dose. After about a year of remission, we try to reduce DMARDs to the minimum amount needed to keep your arthritis under control. Most patients however, do need to be on some form of long-term DMARD therapy, even at a low dose.

If DMARD therapy is not sufficient to control your symptoms the government allows us (provided strict criteria are met) to use more potent treatments called **biologics**. Your rheumatology team will discuss these with you if the need arises.

The rheumatology department works closely with physiotherapists, hand therapists, podiatrist and orthopaedic surgeons. Together, these specialities make up a multidisciplinary team and your rheumatology consultant can direct you towards them if needed.

Are certain diets or complementary therapies useful?

We generally advise a healthy **Mediterranean diet** consisting of bread, pasta, plenty of fruit and vegetables with some fish, having less meat. Choose products based on vegetable and plant oils, such as olive oil rather than butter and cheese. You may want to try complementary therapies but these should not replace conventional treatments and you should discuss them with your rheumatology team.

Psychological Wellbeing

Some patients find it a struggle to come to terms with the diagnosis and management of their arthritic condition. This can lead to low mood and/or anxiety. If you notice these feelings and they continue over some weeks, it is important to seek help from your specialist or GP. They can refer you to a local **Improved Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) service**. You can also contact this service direct by calling **0300 777 0707**.

Arthritis and Employment

Arthritis can impact on your ability to work. You may also need to take time off work to attend clinics and have blood tests. Employers have a statutory duty to employees who develop an illness. Guidance about this and your rights as an employee can be obtained from **Job Centre Plus**, the **Shaw Trust Charity** and the **National Rheumatoid Arthritis Society (NRAS)**. The **NRAS** also have a local group which meets regularly and we would be happy to provide you with their details - please ask a member of staff.

Additional Information

There are a number of organisations that provide useful information about arthritis and its management, which include:

Arthritis Research UK - www.arthritisresearchuk.org

National Rheumatoid Arthritis Society (NRAS) - www.nras.org.uk

National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence - www.nice.org.uk

Our department runs a yearly education meeting for patients which you are welcome to attend by contacting **Michelle Coughlan** on **01438 284128**. We have also produced a series of short videos giving a patient's perspective of early inflammatory arthritis which are available to view at: www.enherts-tr.nhs.uk/patients-visitors/our-services/rheumatology/information-for-patients/

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