



Suffolk Podiatry

Rheumatoid Arthritis & The Feet

How can Rheumatoid Arthritis affect your feet?

Rheumatoid arthritis (RhA) is the most common form of inflammatory arthritis. Unlike osteoarthritis which is caused by wear and tear, rheumatoid arthritis is where your body's immune system mistakenly attacks the body that it is supposed to be protecting, attacking the lining of the joints and other organs. It causes painful inflammation, usually with symmetrical symptoms on both sides of the body, at the same time.

Musculoskeletal effects on the feet (bones, joints and muscles)

The symptoms you may experience include:

- Sore, hot swollen joints. Sometimes called a "flare-up", this may last for just a few days or sometimes longer, can affect multiple joints, not just the foot and may be accompanied by feelings of fatigue.
- Change in foot shape.
- Formation of bursae (fluid filled sacks that form around a joint).
- Joint instability.



Some people will suffer with symptoms in the feet almost immediately whilst others develop symptoms in the feet much later, or may never have foot problems.

Circulation

Some patients with rheumatoid arthritis are more likely to develop reduced blood supply to the legs and feet due to hardening of the arteries (atherosclerosis). This can cause delayed healing from minor cuts and scrapes.

Rheumatoid arthritis is also associated with Raynaud's Phenomenon, where the circulation to the fingers and toes stops working properly. This can cause the toes to change colour (ranging from purple and red, through to white - depending on natural skin tone), especially in colder weather and may cause pain and tingling. Raynaud's also increases the likelihood of developing chilblains on the feet.

If you smoke, you are strongly advised to stop. Smoking seriously affects your circulation and can contribute to poor healing, ulceration and infection.

Neuropathy

Some people with rheumatoid arthritis can develop damage to the nerves. This can cause loss of sensation in the feet and your podiatrist should check how much feeling you have during your assessment.

- It can lead to painful or numb feet (usually beginning at the tips of the toes, but spreading gradually over time)
- If you develop numbness, you are at risk of injury, without being able to feel that there is anything wrong. An injury that is not properly cared for can lead to ulceration and infection.

Advice for keeping your feet healthy

If you experience any new foot pain, changes in joint shape, nodules, swelling or inflammation you should seek urgent attention from your rheumatology Health Care practitioner, (Rheumatology Specialist Nurse, Podiatrist, GP or Consultant). It is recommended that exercise should be reduced when you are experiencing the signs and symptoms of an acute 'flare'.

Wash your feet every day - Rinse them thoroughly and dry them carefully, especially between the toes. Do not soak your feet as this can damage your skin.

Moisturise your feet every day - if your skin is dry, apply a moisturising cream every day, avoiding the areas between your toes.

Toenails - If you are able, it may be safe to cut or file your toenails regularly yourself, or you may need to ask someone to do it for you. Do this by following the curve of the end of your toe. Use a nail file to make sure that there are no sharp edges which could press into the next toe. Do not cut down the sides of your nails.

Socks, stockings and tights - should be changed every day. They should not have bulky seams and the tops should not be elasticated. Avoid walking barefoot - as you risk injuring your feet. Check your shoes - on the bottom before putting them on to make sure that nothing sharp has pierced the outer sole. Also, run your hand inside each shoe to check that no small objects have fallen in.

Badly-fitting shoes - are a common cause of irritation or damage to feet. You should also make sure your footwear fits well. For more information see our Footwear Advice on the Suffolk GP Federation website: <https://suffolkfed.org.uk/healthcare-services/podiatry/>

Over-the-counter corn remedies - do not use corn plasters or paints as these can cause breaks in the skin leading to infection.

Minor cuts and blisters - If you discover any breaks in the skin, minor cuts or blisters, you should cover them with a sterile dressing and check them every day. Do not burst blisters. If the problems do not heal within a few days, or if you notice any signs of infection (swelling, heat, redness or pain), contact a health care professional for advice.

