

Rheumatoid arthritis and osteoporosis

Consumer Factsheet



What is osteoporosis?

Osteoporosis is a condition in which the bones become fragile, leading to a higher risk of breaks or fractures. A minor bump or fall can be enough to cause a break in someone with osteoporosis. People with rheumatoid arthritis are at increased risk of developing osteoporosis. This factsheet explains how rheumatoid arthritis can affect your bones, how to find out if you are at risk of osteoporosis, and what you can do to help protect your bone health.

The link between rheumatoid arthritis and osteoporosis

There are many reasons why people who have rheumatoid arthritis are more likely to develop osteoporosis.

Inflammation

Inflammation is part of our natural response to germs or harmful substances. The heat and redness of inflammation is visible proof that the immune system is working hard to protect the body. In rheumatoid arthritis the immune system becomes faulty, turning on the body to attack its own healthy joints. The joints become inflamed, and the resulting damage triggers a cascade of more inflammation and damage. Uncontrolled rheumatoid arthritis can have an impact on other areas of the body, particularly the bones. Bone surrounding arthritic joints may be weakened by the inflammation occurring nearby. This damage can often be seen on x-rays. In addition, chemicals released from inflamed joints can circulate around the body, weakening other parts of the skeleton and increasing the risk of osteoporosis.

Pain and difficulty moving

Bones need the 'stress' of regular exercise to stay strong and healthy. Having painful and stiff joints can make it difficult to stay active. Over time, lack of physical activity may cause your bones to become weaker, increasing your risk of osteoporosis.

Steroid medications

Steroids (also called glucocorticoids or corticosteroids) are commonly prescribed for rheumatoid arthritis. They are very effective at reducing pain and swelling in the joints. However, it is also well known that steroid medications taken over a long period can lead to bone weakness and increase the risk of osteoporosis.

Could I be at risk of osteoporosis?

Your risk of developing osteoporosis depends on the severity of your arthritis, how long you have had it and the medications you are taking, particularly steroids. Other factors not related to your rheumatoid arthritis are also important. Both osteoporosis and rheumatoid arthritis are more common in women than in men, so women are at greater risk, particularly after the menopause. Other medical problems and any family history of osteoporosis will have an impact on your overall risk of developing osteoporosis. Nutrition, exercise and lifestyle are also crucial to the health of your bones. It is important to discuss your osteoporosis risk factors with your doctor as soon as possible so action can be taken to protect your bone health.

Testing for osteoporosis

Your doctor may refer you for a bone density test. This simple scan measures the density of the bones in the hip and spine. The results will indicate if your bone density is normal, mildly reduced (*osteopenia*) or if you have osteoporosis. Medicare will cover some of the cost of your bone density test if you have been diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis.

Most people don't know they have osteoporosis until they have a fracture. That's why it's vital to discuss your bone health with your doctor so you can take action to help prevent fractures before they occur.



Osteoporosis medications

Depending on your bone strength and other risk factors for osteoporosis, you may need osteoporosis medications to reduce your risk of breaking a bone. There are several safe and effective medications available - your doctor will determine the best treatment for you. Osteoporosis medications have been shown to reduce the risk of breaking a bone by up to 70% but to work effectively they usually need to be taken over several years. If you have been prescribed osteoporosis medication, it is important to keep taking it. If you are concerned about any aspect of your osteoporosis treatment, you should discuss this with your doctor as soon as possible.

What can I do to look after my bones?

There are some other simple but very important things you can do to help protect your bone health if you are living with rheumatoid arthritis. You should try to ensure you have adequate:

- Calcium – 3 serves of dairy foods daily, or increase your intake of other calcium rich foods.
- Vitamin D – get out in the sun for short periods on most days.
- Exercise – weight-bearing and resistance exercises at least 3 times a week.

If your arthritis is severe, it may be difficult at times to eat well or get outdoors. It is important to speak with your doctor about how to ensure your calcium and vitamin D levels are not affected – you may need a supplement.

Healthy lifestyle habits are also important for keeping bones strong. Don't smoke, keep your alcohol intake low and try to stay active in your daily life. More information about lifestyle choices for healthy bones can be found on the Osteoporosis Australia website.