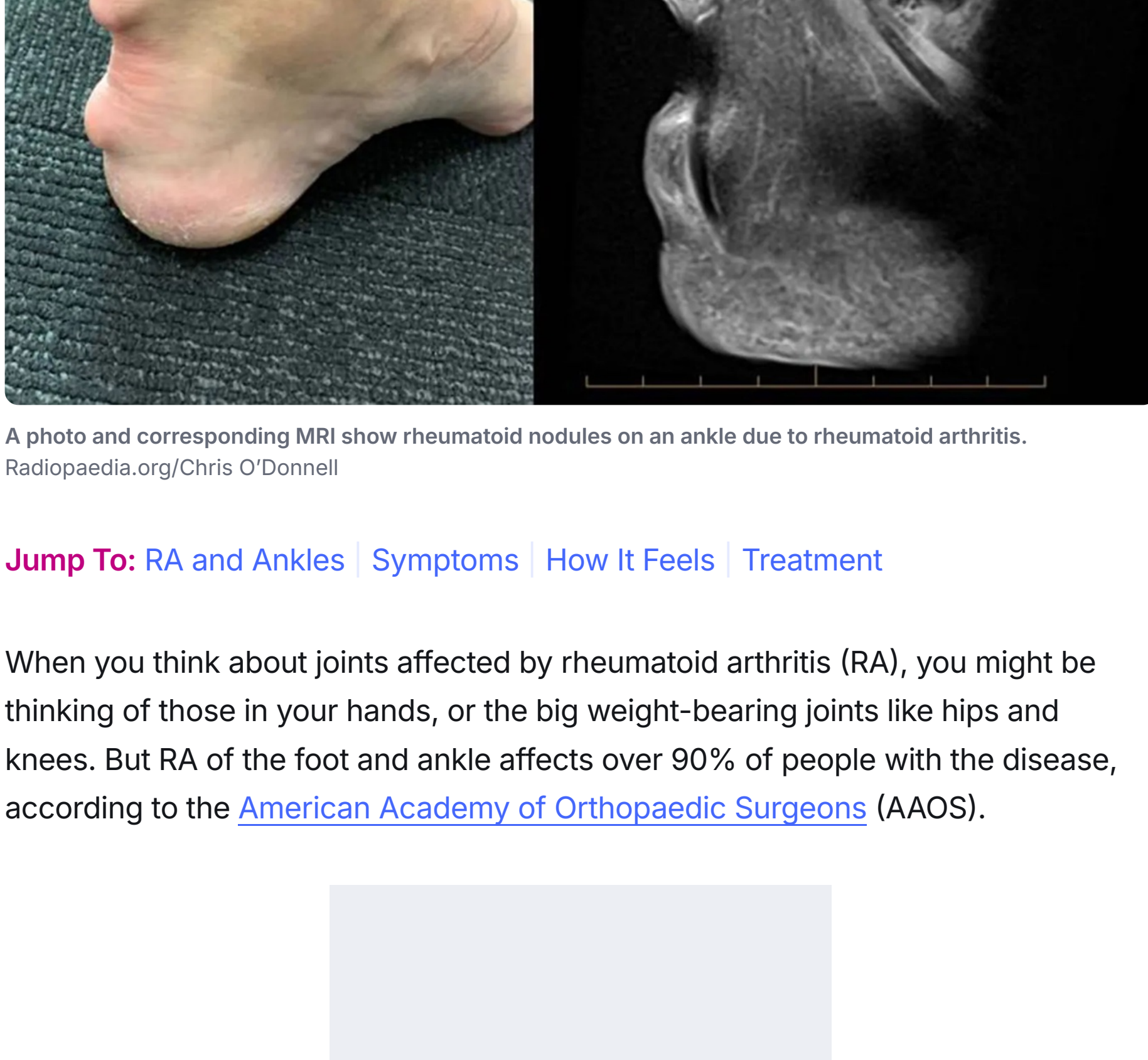


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Rheumatoid Arthritis in the Ankle: What to Expect

Updated Mar 4, 2024 | By: Michelle Beauclair
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A photo and corresponding MRI show rheumatoid nodules on an ankle due to rheumatoid arthritis. Radiopaedia.org/Chris O'Donnell

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When you think about joints affected by rheumatoid arthritis (RA), you might be thinking of those in your hands, or the big weight-bearing joints like hips and knees. But RA of the foot and ankle affects over 90% of people with the disease, according to the [American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons](#) (AAOS).

The origins of RA ankle symptoms are no different than the disease itself: [Rheumatoid arthritis is an autoimmune disorder](#) in which your immune system attacks healthy tissue like ligaments and cartilage and softens bone. In the case of RA, the tissue your immune system targets is the synovium, which lines your joints and produces fluid to lubricate and cushion them.

Let's look at how RA affects the ankle and how it's treated so you'll be well-prepared to manage the condition.

RA and Ankles

How Does RA Affect the Ankle?

RA can affect the ankle in multiple ways. The condition generates [inflammation](#) in the synovium, the ankle joint's lining. As a result, you may experience ankle stiffness, swelling, and pain.

RA ankle symptoms often get worse as RA advances, according to the [National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases](#) (NIAMS), because the inflamed and thickened synovium presses more into the joint, damaging its bone and cartilage. Due to the stretching of the joint capsule, the resulting force changes the joint's structure

As a result, the adjoining tendons, ligaments, and muscles that underpin and secure the joint gradually weaken and lose function. Consequently, this can result in additional joint degradation, pain, and issues utilizing the affected joint.

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Early indicators of ankle RA can be discomfort when walking up stairs and surfaces with inclines like a hill or ramp, says the AAOS. As the condition advances you may experience pain while standing still and walking.

Symptoms

Symptoms of RA in the Ankle and Foot

Rheumatoid arthritis ankle and foot involvement is often one of the earliest indications of RA. A [large study of over 5,000 RA patients](#) reported that swelling, stiffness, or discomfort with an ankle or foot joint was their first symptom. In addition, [RA symptoms](#) customarily affect the same joints in both feet versus one joint in a single foot.

Here's what you might expect from RA of the ankle:

- **Nodule formation:** Inflammation caused by RA can lead to the formation of nodules, particularly at the ankle joint. These nodules, known as rheumatoid nodules, develop due to the abnormal immune response that targets the synovial lining of joints. Over time, inflammatory cells accumulate, forming firm, rounded masses beneath the skin.
- **Pain:** In an [RA study of 320 patients](#), 69% reported ankle or foot pain. Foot and ankle joint pain may be felt when moving and at rest.
- **Stiffness:** The ankle joint tends to feel stiff, usually after a time of prolonged inactivity or [in the morning](#) right after waking. The stiffness may last for several hours.
- **Swelling:** [Ankle and foot joints](#) may be swollen, feel tender, warm, and red in appearance, per the NIAMS, although these symptoms are less common. [An important study](#) noted in RA patients with foot pain, six of 10 had no foot joint tenderness and nine of 10 didn't have swollen foot joints.

What Does RA of the Ankle Feel Like?

[Stella Bard, M.D.](#), a rheumatologist practicing in McKinney, TX, describes the pain felt from ankle RA as "usually a dull and achy pain like a headache or toothache. It doesn't feel sharp, burning, or electric like a nerve pain or the sharp pain of a tendon rupture."

[Teja Mahadeshwar Kapoor, M.D.](#), assistant professor of medicine at Columbia University in New York City, notes some of her patients describe RA ankle pain as a "dull throbbing pain that occurs more in the morning and improves over the course of the day."

Stiffness is common with ankle RA adds Dr. Kapoor. "Patients typically experience stiffness in the morning. Generally it's at least 30 minutes, and many times it tends to be 60 minutes or longer." She adds the stiffness usually improves by moving or stretching the ankle. As people get moving, the symptoms improve.

In contrast, Dr. Kapoor observes that resting the ankle for a prolonged period tends to make it feel worse—the opposite of what you'd expect with an ankle injury, for example, where resting tends to make it feel better.

Dr. Bard advises patients to see either a primary care physician or a rheumatologist as soon as they feel anything that resembles stiffness or if they see swelling. "If there's any kind of interruption of movement in the joint they must get an answer," she says. "When people are in denial, they have to believe many things will go away with time, or just get better on their own. However, that's not the case for rheumatoid arthritis." She adds that permanent joint damage can occur in as little as three weeks, so act quickly.

Treatment

Treating RA of the Ankle

Treatment for rheumatoid arthritis of the ankle is often a multi-pronged approach that can include multiple medications, exercise, orthotic devices/shoe inserts, surgery, and home remedies. Because RA is a systemic disease that typically affects multiple joints including the ankle joint, management and treatment is holistically tailored versus targeting specific joints, says Dr. Kapoor.

"Time is tissue," advocates Dr. Kapoor, meaning the quicker the ankle RA is treated and controlled the better the patient's outcome. Slowing the disease progression helps prevent joint degradation and disability.

Dr. Kapoor adds that [RA treatment](#) is dynamic and changes in accordance with disease severity and medication responses. She notes that RA management follows the "treat to target" philosophy: the target being full remission or very close to remission with little to no signs or symptoms.

Medication

Your rheumatologist's medication approach for your ankle RA will factor in condition, condition onset and severity, your preferences, and your personal preferences. You won't find ankle-specific [RA medication](#)—most RA meds work on a whole-body level.

RA medication management may change over time to fine tune what works best for you. Typically, rheumatologists see RA patients every three months to review how well the medication approach is working and adjust dosages if needed.

[Rheumatoid arthritis medication types](#) may include:

- Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs)
- Corticosteroids
- Disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs (DMARDs) such as methotrexate
- Biologics, which are newer types of DMARDs
- Janus kinase inhibitors, another newer type of DMARD

Exercise

Exercise is an integral part of RA ankle treatment, according to our experts. It's important for maintaining joint mobility, preserving strong and healthy muscles, and enhancing flexibility. Our experts recommend balancing exercise with rest: resting more when RA is active and increasing exercise when RA is in remission.

Your doctor may suggest low-impact exercises like cycling, swimming, walking, or yoga. "I don't recommend [attempting more strenuous] exercise until the inflammation is gone and controlled because they can tear the soft tissue structure in the joint," explains Dr. Bard. It's important to visit with your healthcare provider prior to starting an exercise program.

Orthotic Devices/Shoe Inserts

Pre-made and custom orthotic devices and shoe inserts are an option that may provide additional comfort and pain relief for RA ankle pain.

Choosing a custom option may offer the most improvement according to a 2022 [Journal of Biomechanics](#) study. The results showed people with RA and foot impairments may benefit more from a custom foot orthotic versus a prefabricated orthotic if the treatment goal is to improve your gait.

Surgery

Good news: "It's incredibly rare for an RA patient to require an ankle replacement or a knee replacement because the patient has completely [untreated RA](#)," says Dr. Kapoor. She credits the advances in RA treatment medications in allowing patients to have almost normal joints in some cases or joints with very minimal damage.

If RA ankle surgery is an option for you, these are procedures your doctor might mention:

- **Ankle fusion:** In [ankle fusion](#), the arthritis affected bone surfaces are joined with plates and screws until they grow together. Pain relief can be significant although there is a loss of side-to-side and up-and-down movement.
- **Ankle replacement:** In [ankle replacement](#), damaged cartilage and bone is removed and an artificial joint is inserted. The replacement provides pain relief and maintains more mobility than fusion.

When it comes to rheumatoid arthritis ankle pain, knowledge is truly empowering for early recognition and helping you get the right treatment at the right time to feel better faster.

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