



Everything You Need to Know About **Rheumatology**

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What is Rheumatology?

If you've noticed that your joints or muscles are hurting and inflamed, you most likely have something called arthritis. Arthritis is a term that many often believe to be synonymous with rheumatism, but it's actually a symptom of many different disorders. Joint pain is quite common as people age, but it's not necessarily normal either, so we'll walk through everything you need to know about rheumatology.



Through this guide you'll learn all about common types of rheumatic diseases, symptoms, causes and risks, as well as treatment options and what to expect during your first visit with a rheumatologist.

Rheumatology is the study of rheumatism that includes musculoskeletal disorders, arthritis, and other internal medicine. You'll find that rheumatic diseases are not limited to one singular disorder, but encompass a range of 100-200 diseases. With such a high number of diagnosis possibilities, rheumatic diseases are one of the most prevalent issues for adults 18-100 years old. The [Center for Diseases Control and Prevention](#) (CDC) reported that, "54.4 million US adults (22.7%) annually [...] had some form of arthritis, rheumatoid arthritis, gout, lupus, or fibromyalgia."¹ The CDC also reports that in 2040, an estimated "78 million (26%) US adults [...] are projected to have doctor-diagnosed arthritis."²

¹ Barbour KE, Helmick CG, Boring MA, Brady TJ. Vital signs: prevalence of doctor-diagnosed arthritis and arthritis-attributable activity limitation – United States, 2013–2015. *Morb Mortal Wkly Rep.* 2017;66:246–253. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6609e1External>.

² Hootman JM, Helmick CG, Barbour KE, Theis KA, Boring MA. Updated projected prevalence of self-reported doctor-diagnosed arthritis and arthritis-attributable activity limitation among US adults, 2015–2040. *Arthritis & Rheumatol.* 2016;68(7):1582–1587. doi: 10.1002/art.39692. PubMed PMID: 27015600.

Types of Rheumatic Diseases

As stated above, there are over 100 different types of rheumatic diseases, making this field of study particularly broad. Since there are so many sub-sections of rheumatism, the types vary quite a bit, and they come in all sorts of sizes, shapes, and severity. Here is a list of common conditions:

Ankylosing Spondylitis: Arthritis that affects the spine, causing pain in the pelvis and back.

Arthritis: A symptom of rheumatic diseases which cause joint inflammation.

Autoimmune Diseases: Diseases that affect immune cells and makes them attack your body.

Autoinflammatory Diseases: A disease that affects immune cells. Similar to an autoimmune disease, but autoinflammatory causes rashes, swelling, fevers, and more.

Bursitis: A disease that causes swelling and pain around the bursae or the sack surrounding joints which contains fluid to help friction between the joint and movement.

Fibromyalgia: A disorder causing widespread musculoskeletal pain and fatigue, along with sleep, memory, and mood issues.

Dermatomyositis: A disorder of myositis (inflammation of the muscles causing muscle weakness and a skin rash).

Gout: A type of arthritis that affects the joints, causing a painful buildup of uric acid.

Inflammatory Myopathies: A group of disorders affecting muscle tissue or muscles.

Juvenile Arthritis: Arthritis that affects children and causes inflammation in joints.

Knee Problems: Occurs after developing a disease of your knee.

Lupus: A disease that affects healthy cells and tissues when the body's defense system attacks these areas rather than viruses and bacteria.

Osteoarthritis: Arthritis that affects the tissue on the ends of bones and causes loss of motion, swelling, and pain.

Osteoporosis: A disease that decreases bone density and mass, leading bones to become fragile and easily breakable.

Polymyositis: A disorder of myositis (inflammation of the muscles causing muscle weakness in the trunk of the body).

Psoriatic Arthritis: Arthritis that affects people with psoriasis, which is a buildup of skin cells that form itchy, dry, and scaly patches.

Reactive Arthritis: Joint pain caused by a reaction to an infection.

Rheumatoid Arthritis: A disease that affects many joints, resulting in stiffness, swelling, and pain.

Rheumatic Fever: A disease resulting from inadequately treated strep throat or scarlet fever.

Scleroderma: A group of diseases which cause patches of tightened, hard skin.

Shoulder Problems: Occurs after developing a disease in the shoulder region.

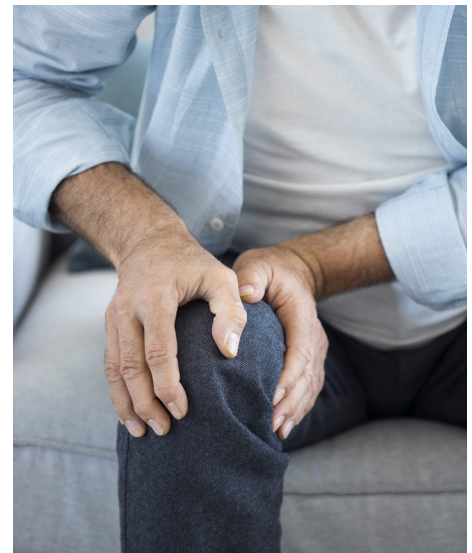
Sjögren's Syndrome: A disease that affects glands causing a dry mouth and eyes.

Tendinitis: A condition where joint pain and swelling occurs and is caused by repeated injury to the tendons that connect your joints.

Symptoms

Dealing with a rheumatic disease can be painful and the issues often associated with the diseases are complex. Many of the autoimmune diseases are harder to diagnose due to symptoms, joint pain, and other relative issues that are similar to rheumatism. With a wide range of possibilities, here are some signs and symptoms:

- Pain in joints
- Pain in muscles
- Stiffness of joints
- Swelling of joints
- Weakness in muscles
- Weakness in bone density
- Tightness of tendons
- Joint deformity
- Eye irritation
- Eye inflammation
- Fevers
- Dry mouth
- Dry eyes
- Chest pain
- Loss of motion in joint
- Loss of flexibility in joints
- Extreme fatigue
- General Malaise
- Seizures
- Strokes



Causes & Risk

The causes of rheumatism vary depending on the disease, but most of the disorders occur because there is an issue within the immune system. When the immune system doesn't process properly, it will attack healthy tissue which then creates damage to organs, joints, muscles, and more.

There are two main factors for rheumatism—genetics and environmental. Of these factors, your genetic makeup may predispose you to joint issues, while your environment and lifestyle may contribute to symptoms of rheumatism.

Other Causes Include:

- Obesity
- Smoking
- Overuse of Joints
- Diet
- Certain Occupations
- Increased Age

Environmental factors include smoking, diet, and obesity. Exercising is a key part to staying healthy and keeping your joints moving, thus aiding in recovery. When you work with a rheumatologist, you may receive a list of exercise routines to improve symptoms. Smoking may contribute and enhance symptoms, especially for rheumatic diseases and disorders that involve the lungs. It's recommended to cease smoking.

Seek assistance with a dietitian to compile anti-inflammatory food options to soothe symptoms. Foods that have omega-3 fatty acids, antioxidants, fiber, and flavonoids will all counteract inflammation.

Beyond that, there is also a gender component to these types of diseases, as females are affected more so than males. Rheumatologists are not exactly sure on what particular sex determines diseases over another, but they believe it may have something to do with shifting hormones. As women go through pregnancy or menopause, their hormones fluctuate and symptom flare ups can happen.³



³ The Journal of Rheumatology: "Onset of symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis in relation to age, sex and menopausal transition."

Diagnosing Rheumatic Diseases

Diagnosing rheumatic diseases is done by a medical professional known as a rheumatologist. An assessment will be made by medical history, severity of issues, and a physical examination of symptoms. Depending upon the type of symptoms experienced, laboratory tests and imaging may occur. While there is no single treatment that will work for everyone, working with your rheumatologist will help you find the best combination of options to manage pain level and the severity of the symptoms.



Myths and Misconceptions about Rheumatism

While diagnosing rheumatic diseases may be tough, there are some myths and misconceptions out there. We break down what is real and what is false about rheumatism with these 5 myths:

- 1. Rheumatism Only Affects Old People:** Although the risk increases with age, children can also develop rheumatic diseases. The [Arthritis Foundation](#) states that "Pediatric rheumatic diseases affect nearly 300,000 children in the United States."
- 2. Rheumatism Only Affects Women:** While rheumatism affects more women than males, diseases like rheumatoid arthritis and other arthritis-based conditions are common among everyone.
- 3. Symptoms of Rheumatism Will Go Away:** Unfortunately, there is no cure for rheumatic diseases, but severity and pain levels can be treated to make them manageable throughout day-to-day life.
- 4. Rheumatism is Just Aches and Pains:** Rheumatism is more than just aches and pains. Some autoimmune diseases are far more destructive on the body and go beyond just painful joints. As symptoms vary from one person to another, it's important to check with a rheumatologist to understand why you may be having pain or aching in joints, bones, and muscles.
- 5. Cracking Your Knuckles Causes Arthritis:** While there may be potential damage to ligaments and soft tissue swelling, cracking your knuckles does not lead to arthritis.

Treatment Options

Since there's no "one size fits all" treatment plan, it's incredibly important to work with your [provider](#) to determine options that will work for you. Some rheumatic diseases respond well to disease-modifying drugs such as biological therapies and injections, while others respond well to medications and traditional treatment options. Homeopathic options such as acupuncture or chiropractic work may also be beneficial, as well as alternative medicines and surgical options. In most cases, surgery is only needed when all other treatments no longer work.

Non-Surgical

There are several non-surgical ways to treat rheumatic diseases. Non-surgical options include supplementation, medication, and injections.

Supplementation

Some people find that the use of supplements helps ease pain and inflammation in joints. Talk with your provider about supplements you should be taking and the dosage. Supplements may include:

- Glucosamine
- Vitamin D
- Omega-3 Fatty Acids
- Green Tea



Medication

Treatment which includes the use of medication for pain management or inflammation is sometimes prescribed by rheumatologists. It's best to discuss the use of medications with your provider and learn how to properly administer oral medications. In some cases, injections are needed.

Hyaluronic Injections

Injections of hyaluronic acid or steroids helps to ease discomfort and pain from those suffering with arthritis. Usually, they are administered in the knee, but vary on a case-by-case basis. It's important to note that not all injections work for everyone who receives them.

Infusion Therapy

Infusion therapy means that a drug is given intravenously, or intramuscular. There are a wide range of disorders that infusion therapy treats, including many rheumatic diseases. Many of these infusions provide patients with needed biological agents that aid in treatment and managing pain. [Voyage Healthcare](#) offers a great infusion center that helps patients suffering from rheumatoid arthritis, lupus, osteoarthritis, psoriatic arthritis, autoimmune diseases, and any issues with connective tissues.

These types of therapies prevent future dispersion of the disease by ensuring it doesn't spread elsewhere in the body. Along with that, the use of these therapies may put diseases into remission. Infusion therapy helps patients get what they need while being able to live a healthier life with their rheumatism.

What to Expect at Your First Appointment

If the pain and symptoms you're experiencing have become too much to handle, it's time to think about finding a solution. You'll want to visit your primary care physician first, who will then refer you to a rheumatologist or a specialist for further assessment.

Once you're referred to a rheumatologist, you should expect these things at your first visit:

- Aim to find a diagnosis
- Treat the symptoms with appropriate options
- Monitor wellness

Beyond expectations, a rheumatologist will go through a physical exam, check your symptoms, ask questions about severity and pain levels, look over joints, muscles, and bones, review any image results, provide treatment options, and offer any other additional referrals.

Referrals from a rheumatologist will include:

1. Referrals to Other Providers
2. References to Orthopedic Aids (splint, brace, cane, etc.)
3. Referrals for Corrective Surgery
4. Referrals for Potential Hospital Stays

While it's important to know what to expect, it's also essential to know what you should bring with you during your first visit. Bring any previous test results (labs, radiographic X-rays, ultrasounds, MRI, etc.), an up-to-date list of medications, allergies, and your family medical history. Knowing your medical history will play a role in diagnosing your condition, as many rheumatic diseases are hereditary.

Q&A from a Rheumatologist

At Voyage Healthcare, our on-site rheumatologist, [Asim S. Khan, M.D.](#), travels between our Robbinsdale and Maple Grove [locations](#) to help people suffering from rheumatic diseases. We recently sat down with Dr. Khan and asked him a few questions about rheumatology:



1. How does rheumatology fit in with Internal Medicine?

Rheumatology is a subspecialty of [internal medicine](#) and deals with autoimmune diseases, connective tissues diseases, and arthritis.

2. What are the treatment options at Voyage Healthcare?

At Voyage Healthcare, we offer non-surgical treatments which include:

- Supplementation
- Medication
- Hydrontic Injections
- Infusion Therapy

It's important to note that Methotrexate is one of the most effective medications to treat rheumatoid arthritis.

3. What are some significant advancements in rheumatic care?

The biological agents are truly changing the way for rheumatic care.

4. What are common rheumatic diseases you see at Voyage Healthcare?

There are a lot of rheumatic diseases, but some of the most common that we see at Voyage Healthcare include:

- Arthritis
- Lupus
- Osteoarthritis
- Osteoporosis

5. What are some common questions you get from patients about rheumatic diseases?

1. Will I be deformed?
2. Will I have my internal organs damaged?
3. Will I be able to walk?
4. Will I be able to carry on my daily activities?

6. What should people do to alleviate their pain associated with rheumatism?

Come to Voyage Healthcare! We have some of the best medicine to help.

Rheumatology and Voyage Healthcare

Our [rheumatology department](#) offers comprehensive care for patients suffering from any type of rheumatic disease. We diagnose, assess, and treat common conditions such as arthritis (osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis), gout, chronic joint pain, chronic back pain, tendonitis, lupus, and many others.



Don't let your joint pain stop you from living your best life.

Schedule your appointment to visit Dr. Khan and start getting back to healthier, pain-free you!

[REQUEST AN APPOINTMENT](#)