



Reducing chronic inflammation

This leaflet gives advice on reducing chronic (long term) inflammation of joints experienced by patients with rheumatoid arthritis (RA).

What is inflammation?

Inflammation refers to your body's process of fighting against things that harm it, e.g. a cut or infection. In auto-immune diseases, the brain mistakenly thinks something is damaging the cells in your joints and triggers an immune response. This response includes the release of antibodies and proteins as well as increased blood to an area. In acute inflammation or a flare, this appears as hot, swollen, red joints. This response can last a few hours to a few days. However, chronic inflammation happens when an immune response continues, triggering an on-going state of alert. Common symptoms of chronic inflammation include: ongoing pain and swelling in the joints, fatigue, low mood, stomach irritation.

Importance of reducing chronic inflammation

Long term inflammation/swelling in the joints can be damaging to the bone and soft tissue and restrict range of movement. It is therefore important to reduce inflammation as much as possible. Regularly taking your prescribed medication is very important. You may also be able to take over the counter NSAID's (speak to your GP or rheumatology nurse for further advice). There are also things you can do to help.

Advice to help with inflammation / swelling

- **Contrast bathing:** Swapping between hot and cold aids lymphatic drainage by increasing blood flow. Start and finish with the heat. Apply a heat source, e.g. hot water, heat pad, hot water bottle (as warm as is comfortable for you), so that the joint is slightly red. Hold for 30 seconds. Try to keep the joint moving while the heat is applied. Then apply cold (as cold as you can tolerate), e.g. iced water, cold compress for 10-30 seconds. Repeat 5-8 times.

- **Elevation:** Uses gravity to help the fluid flow out of the swollen area. You will need to raise the whole of the swollen limb above the level of your heart. You can use pillows and towels to support your limb while you are sleeping or resting. Aim for 30 minutes 2-3 times a day. Try to sleep on your back or your side with your hand by your ear. This is the easiest resting position for elevating your hand. If you also have hip pain, a pillow between your legs can help reduce this.

If you are sitting with your feet up, make sure you have lumbar (lower back) support and your arms/other foot is supported to ensure you do not slump into a bad position for your back. It may be easiest to lie flat on a sofa with your feet up on the sofa arm.



- **Massage:** Massage towards the body in firm strokes – your therapist will show you how to complete this to help manually move fluid out of the joint spaces.
- **Compression.** Aims to limit the amount of space where swelling can build up and can help push fluid out of the joint. There is a variety of ways to apply compression including:
 - Oedema gloves
 - Compressive wrap (Coban wrap or elastic sports wrap)
 - Tubi-grip
 - Digi-sleeves

Your therapist will advise which is most appropriate for you and how to apply it: Full time or just at night _____.

Oedema gloves, tubi-grip and digi-sleeves should be removed daily to wash and dry the skin. All can be hand washed in warm soapy water and then allowed to air dry. Ensure that your compression glove is fully dry before putting it back on – but do not dry it on a radiator, in direct sunlight or a tumble dryer (it will shrink).

- **Kinesiology tape:** Is an alternative to compression therapy. It is an elastic cotton tape that helps lift the skin to create tissue space, improving the drainage of the swelling (fluid). Your therapist can show you how to apply this.
- **Exercises:** Will help stretch and strengthen the muscles in the swollen area to avoid long-term stiffness that can develop. Movement of the joints will also help increase blood circulation and lymphatic flow, moving the excess fluid away from the tissue.

It is also important in helping to reduce the body's immune response by avoiding triggers to inflammation:

- **Diet:** Sugar and caffeine are thought to increase inflammation. A low glycaemic diet has been shown to help lower inflammation. See www.versusarthritis.org.uk or www.nras.org.uk for leaflets on diet and arthritis.
- **Smoking, obesity, excessive alcohol intake and chronic stress can also cause ongoing inflammation.** If you need help with managing these factors, please speak to your GP for help in accessing appropriate services.

Contacting us

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To find out more about our Trust visit www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk

Please ask if you need this information in another language or format.

RBFT Rheumatology Therapies, January 2024. Next review due: January 2026