

Heart disease in rheumatoid arthritis

The risk for heart disease in patients with rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is 50-70% higher compared with the general population.

RA is an independent risk factor for ischemic heart disease and is the most common causes of death in RA.

Types of heart disease in RA

- Heart attack – The risk of developing a heart attack is two to three times that of the general population
- Heart failure – RA patients have twice the risk of heart failure as the general population
- Irregular heart rhythms – These are less common than heart attacks and heart failure but can occur in patients with RA
- Pericarditis – The lining of the heart can become inflamed in people with RA

What symptoms suggest heart problems?

- Chest pain or pressure
- Shortness of breath
- Pain or numbness in arms or legs
- Pain in the neck, jaw, upper belly (feels like heartburn) or back
- Swelling of lower legs
- Fatigue
- Palpitations (feels like your heart is racing)
- Lightheadedness, dizziness or fainting

Causes of increased risk for heart disease in RA

Risk for heart disease in patients with RA may be related to

- Extent of extent of inflammation
- Lack of adequate physical activity
- Higher frequency of hypertension – may be related to medications (NSAIDs, steroids)
- Higher levels of diabetes
- Change in lipid profile (cholesterol levels)
- Smoking
- Being overweight or obesity
- Genetic risk factors



What you can do to help reduce the risk for heart problems

- Learn about your risk for heart disease
- Avoid or quit smoking
- Exercise regularly and stay physically active
- Eat a healthy, balanced diet
- Learn to control stress
- Control blood pressure and blood sugar (primary doctor may be able to help)
- Control the inflammation caused by your RA (work with your rheumatologist)
- Regular checks of blood pressure, blood sugar and cholesterol may be advisable even in the absence of symptoms
- May need to change medications - reduce those that increase risk for heart disease or add those that help protect from heart disease)