

Module 2: The early stage of rheumatoid arthritis (RA) (< 2 years post diagnosis)

- Early symptoms of RA may be severe as some drug treatments take up to 12 weeks to take effect. Patients may be prescribed several different medications regimens until an effective agent(s) is identified.
- Take all reasonable measures to ensure the patient has seen a **rheumatologist** and **started treatment early**. Early intervention is **critical** for an improved prognosis.
- Listen and look for **stress, anxiety, depression, hopelessness**. On-refer if required.

What are the physiotherapist's key roles in the early stage of RA?

Key Roles	Specific things to do
Communication	<p><i>Listening</i> is key – understand the impact of RA on that individual and their specific concerns</p> <p><i>Advocate</i> for the patient with e.g. workplace, community support agencies</p> <p><i>Communication</i> with other health professionals and family</p>
Patient education	<p>Align patient and therapist <i>expectations</i> of management:</p> <p><i>What to expect</i>: pain, functional impairments, flares</p> <p>How to use a <i>therapeutic window</i></p> <p>Where to seek <i>further information</i> e.g. community organisations, peer support groups, community exercises classes e.g. hydrotherapy, RA specific education programmes, websites, assistive devices</p> <p>The association between pain, fatigue, flares and impaired function and feelings of <i>depression, anxiety, hopelessness</i> and <i>stress</i></p> <p><i>Pacing</i></p>
Self-management support	<p>Assisting patients with “actively participating in their healthcare”. Including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accessing the right information • Making decisions about one’s healthcare (e.g. <i>setting goals</i>) • Taking action to address one’s healthcare (e.g. attending a course) • Taking a central role in managing their health as a partner with their healthcare team • Making healthy behaviour choices (e.g. quitting smoking)
Patient-centred management plan	<p>Identifying the patient’s main physical, functional and psychosocial issues</p> <p><i>Assessing</i> and <i>re-assessing</i></p> <p>Providing patient-centred home exercise programme</p> <p>Supporting patient self-management strategies e.g. goal setting, understanding the disease and identifying needs.</p>
Respond to...	<p><i>Flares</i> - this may mean current pharmacology may not be appropriate for the stage of the disease. <i>Review by rheumatologist</i> is recommended.</p> <p>Changing priorities of the patient as their disease develops</p>

Practice summary sheet

	Extra-articular features and adjust management as required.
Manage signs and symptoms	<p>Aim to minimise effects on ADL's and maximise function</p> <p>Address pain and inflammation</p> <p>Implement joint protection strategies (see joint protection techniques summary) Improve joint stability</p> <p>Strength and aerobic training, functional rehabilitation, hydrotherapy</p>
Monitor disease activity and severity	<p>Several tools are available including:</p> <p>Clinical Disease Activity Index (CDAI); Disease Activity Score; Patient Activity Scale; Routine Assessment of Patient Index, Simplified Disease Activity Index (See Anderson et al) for a systematic review of RA disease measures</p>

Useful Patient Resources:

[Arthritis Foundations](#); [Australian Rheumatology Association](#);

Safety Issues

- *Avoid high intensity exercise or manual techniques during a flare.* Instead, manage pain, fatigue and inflammation
- *Avoid use of joint mobilisation/manipulation, especially in the upper cervical spine* (see Module 4)
- Avoid techniques that may put increased stress on areas where *skin is fragile* due to age or corticosteroid use, for example high-pressure manual therapy or use of kinaesthetic taping
- *Assess skin status* (sensory perception) before applying electro-physical agents

Relevant Clinical Guidelines

- http://www.rheumatology.org.uk/includes/documents/cm_docs/2009/m/management_of_rheumatoid_arthritis_first_2_years.pdf
- <http://hej.sagepub.com/content/71/4/397>
- <http://ptjournal.apta.org/content/84/10/934.full.pdf+html>
- <http://ptjournal.apta.org/content/84/11/1016.full.pdf+html>
- <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19945896>