

# Treating rheumatoid arthritis early may cut damaging effects

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Study suggests that delaying treatment leads to more joint inflammation, disability down the road.

(HealthDay)—Immediate and effective treatment for rheumatoid arthritis reduces the risk that patients will have joint damage and disability within a few years, a new study suggests.

The findings show the need for doctors to discourage [patients](#) from delaying [treatment](#), according to the researchers at the Hospital for Special Surgery in New York City.

"We need to educate people diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis about this. Some want to delay treatment because they are afraid. They haven't wrapped their heads around the fact that they have this disease, or they are reluctant to start taking medication. Some resort to non-medicinal approaches, many of which have limited effect," study lead investigator and rheumatologist Dr. Vivian Bykerk said in a hospital news release.

"Unfortunately, I have seen too many people delay [effective treatment](#) approaches and they come back a year later very disappointed, often with [joint damage](#) that could have been prevented. The longer you have [inflammation](#) in the joints, the more likely you are to have joint damage, and it is going to impact how you function down the road," she added.

The study included 833 patients with early rheumatoid arthritis—defined as having symptoms for a year or less. Six months into the study, the patients were classified as having achieved low disease activity or not. Low disease activity means that joint pain, swelling and other signs of inflammation are significantly reduced.

The 56 percent of patients who achieved low disease activity at six months were much less likely to have joint damage and disability at two years, according to the findings to be presented Monday at the annual meeting of the American College of Rheumatology/Association of Rheumatology Health Professionals in San Diego.

"We believe there is a window in which people have a much better chance of getting [rheumatoid arthritis](#) under good control, often with less intense therapy, and the window is within the first three months of developing joint inflammation," Bykerk said.

These findings show the need for doctors to warn patients about the hazards of delaying therapy and to follow patients more often in the early stages of treatment, she added.

Research presented at medical meetings is considered preliminary until published in a peer-reviewed journal.

**More information:** The Arthritis Foundation has more on [rheumatoid arthritis](#).

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