

What Is a Rheumatologist?

A rheumatologist is an internist or pediatrician who received further training in the diagnosis (detection) and treatment of arthritis and other musculoskeletal diseases. Also called “rheumatic” diseases, these diseases affect the joints, muscles and bones. Many rheumatologists also conduct research to find the cause of and better treatment for these disabling diseases.

What kind of training do rheumatologists have?

Rheumatologists must first complete four years of medical school and three years of residency training in primary care (either internal medicine or pediatrics). After taking a national exam to become board certified, rheumatologists devote two to three years in specialized training in an accredited rheumatology fellowship program.

Most rheumatologists who plan to treat patients choose to become board certified in rheumatology after their fellowship training. If the doctor has trained in internal medicine, the subspecialty exam and certification are by the American Board of Internal Medicine. Physicians who trained in pediatrics take their board exam from the American Board of Pediatrics.

Rheumatologists who are certified by these boards after 1990 must complete an extensive recertification process every 10 years. This process shows they have kept their medical skills and knowledge up to date.

What do rheumatologists treat?

Rheumatologists treat arthritis, certain autoimmune diseases (when the body comes under attack by its own immune system), musculoskeletal pain and osteoporosis. There are more than 100 types of these rheumatic conditions. A few of them are [rheumatoid arthritis](#), [osteoarthritis](#), [gout](#), [lupus](#), [ankylosing spondylitis](#), [osteoporosis](#), [fibromyalgia](#) and [tendinitis](#). Some of the rheumatic diseases are very serious and can be hard to diagnose and treat.

When should you see a rheumatologist?

If muscle or joint pains are not severe and began just a few days before, it makes sense to give the problem time to resolve on its own. But sometimes, pain in the joints, muscles or bones is severe or lasts more than a few days. At that point, you should see your doctor.

Many types of rheumatic diseases are not easy to find in the early stage, and you may need to see a specialist. Rheumatologists are specially trained to find the cause of joint swelling and pain. It is important for patients to get a correct diagnosis early so that proper treatment can begin. Some musculoskeletal problems respond best to treatment in the early stages of the disease.

Because some rheumatic diseases are complex, one visit to a rheumatologist may not be enough to get a diagnosis and treatment plan. These diseases tend to be chronic (long term) and often change over

time. Sometimes they get worse, and sometimes they go away for a while and then return. Rheumatologists work closely with patients to find the problem and design a treatment plan.

How does the rheumatologist work with other health care professionals?

The role the rheumatologist plays in health care depends on many factors and the patient's needs. Most often, the rheumatologist works with other physicians.

Sometimes the rheumatologist acts as a consultant to advise another doctor about a diagnosis and treatment plan. In other cases, the rheumatologist acts as a manager and relies on the help of many skilled professionals. This team may include nurses, physical and occupational therapists, psychologists and social workers. Teamwork is important, since musculoskeletal disorders often last a long time. Health care providers can help patients and their families cope with the changes these chronic diseases cause in their lives.

Is specialty care more expensive?

You may be surprised to learn that specialized care may save time and money and reduce the severity of the disease. A rheumatologist has special training to spot clues in the history and physical exam. The proper tests done early may save money in the long run. Prompt diagnosis and specially tailored treatment often save money and minimize the long-term effects of rheumatic diseases.

To find a rheumatologist

For a list of rheumatologists in your area, [click here](#).

Learn more about [rheumatology health professionals](#).

For more information

The American College of Rheumatology has compiled this list to give you a starting point for your own additional research. The ACR does not endorse or maintain these Web sites, and is not responsible for any information or claims provided on them. It is always best to talk with your rheumatologist for more information and before making any decisions about your care.

The Arthritis Foundation

www.arthritis.org

The National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases

http://www.niams.nih.gov/health_info/reactive_arthritis/ReactiveArthritis_FF.pdf

American College of Rheumatology: Choose Rheumatology

www.rheumatology.org/education/chooserheumatology/index.asp

American College of Rheumatology Research and Education Foundation

Learn how the ACR Research and Education Foundation advances research and training to improve the health of people with rheumatic diseases.

www.rheumatology.org/REF

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Written by Raymond L. Yung, MD, and reviewed by the American College of Rheumatology Communications and Marketing Committee.

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