



Understanding Your Positive Rheumatoid Factor (RF)

What You Need to Know



What is Rheumatoid Factor (RF)?

- **A blood test:** RF measures an antibody (a protein made by the immune system).
- **A clue, not a diagnosis:** It helps doctors evaluate for rheumatoid arthritis (RA) and some other conditions, but it is not the full answer.
- **Common in RA:** Many people with RA have a positive RF, but not all.

Common Questions



Why did my doctor order this test?

- To investigate joint pain or swelling and to help rule in or rule out RA and other conditions.

Can RF levels change over time?

- Yes. RF can increase, decrease, or stay stable. Doctors usually don't follow the number closely, your symptoms matter more.

Does a positive RF mean I will get RA later?

- Not always. Some people with positive RF never develop RA. Doctors look at your overall risk, family history, and symptoms.

If I already have RA, do I need RF checked again?

- Usually no. Once RF is known, your doctor focuses on your disease activity and how well treatment is working.





What RF Is

- A blood test that may help explain symptoms like joint pain, swelling, or stiffness.
- A useful piece of information for your doctor, alongside your symptoms, exam, imaging, and other labs.
- A test that can show up positive in:
 - Rheumatoid arthritis
 - Other autoimmune diseases (like Sjögren's, lupus)
 - Chronic infections (like hepatitis C, tuberculosis)
 - Sometimes healthy older adults

What RF Is Not

- **Not a guarantee of RA** - Many healthy people with a positive RF never develop RA.
- **Not required to have RA** - Up to 30% of RA patients have a negative RF ("seronegative RA").
- **Not a disease severity test** - A higher number doesn't always mean your arthritis is worse.
- **Not a treatment guide** - Doctors don't use RF alone to decide medications.

What This Means for You

RF is only one piece of the diagnostic process.

Your rheumatologist will focus more on:

- Your symptoms (how you feel day to day)
- Physical exam findings (joint swelling, tenderness)
- Imaging and inflammation markers

Together, these pieces provide the full picture.



Key Takeaways

- RF is a supportive test, not a definitive answer.
- Both positive and negative results must be interpreted in the context of your symptoms.
- Having a positive RF does not automatically mean you have RA.
- Your rheumatologist will help interpret your results and guide next steps.

