

# RHEUMATOID VASCULITIS (RV)

## What is Rheumatoid vasculitis?

Rheumatoid vasculitis (RV) refers to patients with rheumatoid arthritis, who also develop inflammatory disease in small and medium sized blood vessels.

## What causes RV?

There is no known cause of RV, but it is not contagious. An autoimmune process in which the body “attacks” itself is one possible explanation.

## Who gets RV?

RV typically occurs in patients who have had rheumatoid arthritis for a long time. Patients with rheumatoid arthritis seem more likely to develop RV when they have high rheumatoid factor levels and have had rheumatoid arthritis for at least one year. Males with rheumatoid arthritis are more likely (2-4 times more likely) than females with rheumatoid arthritis to develop RV.

## What are the symptoms?

RV can involve many of the body’s organs, including the skin, nerves to the hands and feet, blood vessels of the fingers and toes, and the eyes. Skin vasculitis is the most common manifestation of RV (90 % of patients). Inflammation of the small blood vessels in the skin results in the development of red spots on the skin. When the eyes are involved, the white part of the eye becomes inflamed (scleritis).

The heart can also be affected by the disease, which can cause inflammation of the external part of the heart (pericarditis) and abnormal heart rate (arrhythmia). These symptoms put these patients at a higher risk for having a heart attack (myocardial infarction).

Patients with rheumatoid arthritis should see a physician if they develop new or worsened symptoms such as weight loss, fever, and lack of energy, or any new symptoms beyond the usual joint symptoms.

## How is RV diagnosed?

The diagnosis of RV almost always requires a biopsy of tissue affected by the disease; an inflamed nerve or a kidney if there are clinical signs of kidney involvement.

In rare cases RV may affect large blood vessels. If it does, an angiography will be taken so that the vessels can be evaluated. This test is especially useful to determine the location and appearance of large vessels that may be affected by the disease.

## What is the prognosis?

Limited data are available concerning the outcome of patients with RV, although they usually have worse and more ongoing symptoms than those with rheumatoid arthritis who do not have RV.

## What is the treatment?

Biopsy-proven RV, even if only in one organ, requires aggressive therapy. Patients with aggressive RV disease are usually started on steroids.

Since RV most often occurs when there is very active rheumatoid arthritis, aggressive treatment usually helps to control symptoms of both rheumatoid arthritis and vasculitis.

## What is Vasculitis?

Vasculitis is an inflammation of the blood vessels, arteries, veins or capillaries. Vasculitis is a family of diseases. The cause of vasculitis is unknown, but through research and treatment, outcomes have improved significantly over the past 20 years.

Continued research is essential for further advances in these diseases, which can be life-threatening.

## About the Vasculitis Foundation

The Vasculitis Foundation (VF) is the largest international patient support group for people with vasculitis.

Through its website, newsletter, brochures, informational materials, medical consultants, symposia and chapters, VF raises awareness and educates its patients, family members and friends.



Support

Awareness

Research

[www.VasculitisFoundation.org](http://www.VasculitisFoundation.org)

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