# Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA): Pathogenesis, Treatment Modalities, and Underlying Mechanisms

Zihan Hu*

TW Education, China

*Corresponding Author. Email: Kevin-hzh@outlook.com

**Abstract.** Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is a chronic autoimmune disorder characterized by synovial inflammation, progressive joint damage, and systemic manifestations. Around eighteen million people worldwide were living with RA in 2019, and the global incidence is estimated at 0.24%–1% of the population. While the disease most commonly develops in adults in their 60s—likely reflecting cumulative immune system changes and environmental exposures—it can also present much earlier, including in middle-aged or young adults. This paper provides an in-depth exploration of RA, focusing on its pathological mechanisms and current treatment approaches. The pathogenesis involves a complex interplay of genetic susceptibility, immune dysregulation, and environmental triggers. Treatment strategies, including disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs (DMARDs), biologic agents, and emerging therapies, are also discussed in relation to their mechanisms of action. By elucidating the connections between RA pathology and treatment principles, this review aims to enhance understanding for researchers, clinicians, and patients, supporting improved disease management and patient outcomes.

**Keywords:** Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA), Pathogenesis, Treatment, Mechanisms.

## 1. Introduction

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is a debilitating autoimmune disease that affects approximately 0.5–1% of the global population [1]. It primarily targets the synovial joints, leading to pain, swelling, stiffness, and, if left untreated, irreversible joint deformity and functional impairment. Beyond joint involvement, RA can also cause systemic complications such as cardiovascular disease, pulmonary fibrosis, and rheumatoid nodules. The complexity of RA pathogenesis and the diverse range of clinical manifestations pose significant challenges for effective management.

Understanding the underlying mechanisms of RA is crucial for developing targeted and effective treatments. In recent decades, substantial progress has been made in deciphering the pathological processes of RA, from genetic predisposition to immune-mediated joint destruction. Concurrently, the therapeutic armamentarium for RA has expanded, with new drugs and treatment strategies emerging. This paper synthesizes current knowledge on RA pathogenesis and treatment, highlighting the mechanisms by which various therapies exert their effects.

## 2. Pathogenesis of Rheumatoid Arthritis

### 2.1. Genetic Susceptibility

Genetic factors play a pivotal role in RA susceptibility. The strongest genetic association is with the human leukocyte antigen (HLA) class II region, particularly the *HLA-DRB1* alleles encoding the "shared epitope" [2]. These alleles are thought to contribute to the presentation of autoantigenic peptides to T cells, initiating an abnormal immune response. In addition to *HLA* genes, non-HLA genetic factors such as PTPN22, *STAT4, and TRAF1/C5* have been identified through genome-wide association studies (GWAS) [3]. These genes are involved in various immune functions, including T cell activation, cytokine signaling, and inflammation regulation.

At the core of RA pathogenesis is immune system dysregulation, involving both adaptive and innate immunity. T cells are central players in the adaptive immune response in RA. CD4+ T cells, especially T helper 1 (Th1) and T helper 17 (Th17) subsets, are activated in the synovium. Th1 cells

secrete cytokines such as interferon-γ (IFN-γ), which promote inflammation and activate macrophages. Th17 cells produce interleukin 17 (IL-17), which stimulates synovial fibroblasts and osteoclasts, contributing to joint inflammation and bone erosion [4].

B cells also play multiple roles in RA. They produce autoantibodies, such as rheumatoid factor (RF) and anti-citrullinated protein antibodies (ACPA), which are important diagnostic markers [5]. Autoantibodies can form immune complexes, activating the complement system and triggering inflammatory responses in the synovium. Additionally, B cells act as antigen-presenting cells and secrete cytokines, further modulating the immune response. Innate immune cells, including macrophages, dendritic cells, and neutrophils, are activated in the RA synovium. Macrophages are a major source of pro-inflammatory cytokines such as tumor necrosis factor-α (TNF-α), interleukin-1 (IL-1), and interleukin-6 (IL-6) [6]. These cytokines amplify the inflammatory cascade, promoting synovial hyperplasia, angiogenesis, and cartilage degradation. Dendritic cells present autoantigens to T cells, initiating and maintaining the autoimmune response. Neutrophils contribute to tissue damage through the release of reactive oxygen species and proteolytic enzymes.

Synovial fibroblasts in RA (RA-FLS) exhibit a transformed phenotype, with increased proliferation, migration, and production of matrix-degrading enzymes. Unlike normal synovial fibroblasts, RA-FLS are resistant to apoptosis, leading to persistent synovial hyperplasia [7]. They secrete matrix metalloproteinases (MMPs) and other proteases that degrade cartilage and bone. RA-FLS also interact with immune cells, responding to cytokines such as TNF-α and IL-6, and in turn, producing cytokines and chemokines that recruit more immune cells to the synovium.

Environmental factors can trigger RA in genetically susceptible individuals. Smoking is a well-established risk factor, particularly for ACPA-positive RA [8]. Smoking induces citrullination of proteins in the lungs, which can then be recognized as autoantigens. Other potential environmental triggers include viral and bacterial infections, although the specific pathogens and mechanisms remain unclear.

## 3. Treatment Modalities for Rheumatoid Arthritis

### 3.1. Disease-Modifying Antirheumatic Drugs (DMARDs)

Methotrexate (MTX) is the cornerstone of RA treatment. It exerts its effects through multiple mechanisms, including inhibition of dihydrofolate reductase, which reduces nucleotide synthesis and cell proliferation [9]. MTX also modulates cytokine production, decreasing the levels of pro - pro-inflammatory cytokines such as TNF-α and IL-6. Other conventional synthetic DMARDs include leflunomide, sulfasalazine, and hydroxychloroquine. Leflunomide inhibits dihydroorotate dehydrogenase, interfering with de novo pyrimidine synthesis and T cell activation. Sulfasalazine is broken down into sulfapyridine and 5-aminosalicylic acid, which have anti - anti-inflammatory and immunomodulatory effects. Hydroxychloroquine acts on multiple targets, including inhibiting endosomal TLR signaling and modulating T cell and B cell function.

Janus kinase (JAK) inhibitors are a class of targeted synthetic DMARDs. JAKs are intracellular kinases involved in cytokine receptor signaling. By inhibiting JAKs (e.g., tofacitinib, baricitinib), these drugs block the signaling of cytokines such as IL-2, IL-6, IL-12, and IFN-γ, which are crucial for the immune response in RA [10]. JAK inhibitors have shown efficacy in reducing disease activity and slowing joint damage progression.

### 3.2. Biologic DMARDs

TNF-α is a key pro - pro-inflammatory cytokine in RA, and TNF-α inhibitors (e.g., etanercept, infliximab, adalimumab) are highly effective biologic agents. Etanercept is a soluble TNF receptor - Fc fusion protein that binds to TNF-α, preventing its interaction with cell-surface receptors. Infliximab and adalimumab are monoclonal antibodies that directly neutralize TNF-α. By blocking TNF-α signaling, these drugs reduce synovial inflammation, inhibit osteoclast activation, and slow down joint destruction [11].

Interleukin-6 is a major pro-inflammatory cytokine in RA, involved in T cell activation, B cell differentiation, and acute-phase response. Tocilizumab, a monoclonal antibody against the IL-6 receptor, and sarilumab, another IL-6 receptor antagonist, block IL-6 signaling [1]. These drugs are effective in reducing disease activity, especially in patients who have an inadequate response to TNF-α inhibitors.

Rituximab is a chimeric monoclonal antibody that targets CD20 on B cells, leading to B cell depletion. By reducing the number of B cells, rituximab decreases autoantibody production and modulates T cell activation [12]. It is particularly useful in ACPA-positive RA patients and those who fail to respond to other DMARDs.

Abatacept is a soluble CTLA-4-Fc fusion protein that blocks the interaction between CD80/CD86 on antigen-presenting cells and CD28 on T cells, thereby inhibiting T cell co-stimulation [13]. This leads to reduced T cell activation and cytokine production, contributing to the suppression of synovial inflammation.

### 3.3. Glucocorticoids

Glucocorticoids (e.g., prednisone) are potent anti - anti-inflammatory agents used in RA treatment. They act by binding to glucocorticoid receptors, which then translocate to the nucleus and modulate gene expression. Glucocorticoids inhibit the production of pro-inflammatory cytokines, reduce immune cell infiltration, and suppress synovial inflammation [14]. However, long-term use is associated with significant side effects such as osteoporosis, diabetes, and increased infection risk, so they are often used as bridging therapy or for short-term symptom control.

### 3.4. Emerging Therapies

Recent research has focused on identifying new therapeutic targets for RA. For example, therapies targeting osteoclasts and bone metabolism, such as denosumab (a monoclonal antibody against RANKL), may have potential in preventing joint erosion [15]. Additionally, immunomodulatory approaches targeting specific T cell subsets or cytokine networks are being explored. Personalized medicine, based on genetic and immunological profiling of individual patients, may also revolutionize RA treatment in the future, allowing for more precise and effective therapies.

## 4. Conclusion

Rheumatoid arthritis is a complex autoimmune disease with a multifactorial pathogenesis involving genetic susceptibility, immune dysregulation, and environmental triggers. The diverse range of treatment modalities, from conventional DMARDs to biologic agents and emerging therapies, targets different aspects of the pathological process. Understanding the mechanisms of action of these treatments is essential for optimizing therapy and improving patient outcomes. As research continues to unravel the complexities of RA pathogenesis, more targeted and effective treatments will likely be developed, ultimately leading to better management of this debilitating disease.

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