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# Rheumatoid arthritis

## Keywords

rheumatoid arthritis; arthritis/rheumatic diseases; general practice



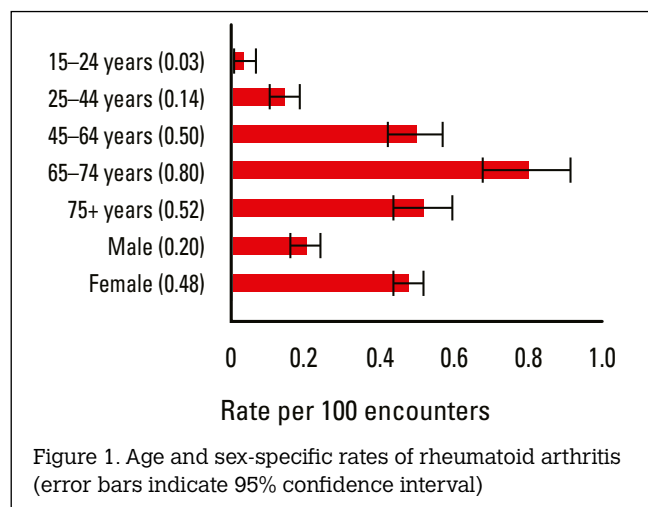
Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is a chronic inflammatory disease characterised by joint swelling, joint tenderness and destruction of synovial joints, leading to severe disability. RA is considered an autoimmune disease.<sup>1</sup> A study in the UK found the population minimum prevalence of RA is 1.16% in women and 0.44% in men.<sup>2</sup> In Australia, the estimated prevalence is 0.6%.<sup>3</sup> Using BEACH data from April 2011 to March 2013, we examined the rate of RA and its management in Australian general practice.

Rheumatoid arthritis was managed 716 times in the two-year period, at four in every 1000 encounters, and made up 0.2% of all problems managed. About three-quarters of patients (77.5%) at RA encounters were female. The age and sex-specific rates showed a significantly higher rate of RA management for patients aged 65–74 years (0.8 per 100 encounters), and females were managed for the condition almost two and a half times more often than males (Figure 1).

## Management of RA

There were 101 medications prescribed, supplied or advised for every 100 RA problems managed. Methotrexate was the most common, recorded for 23% of RA problems and accounting for 22% of medications for RA. Hydroxychloroquine made up 8% of these medications and prednisolone 7%.

Other treatments were recorded at a rate of 26 per 100 RA problems managed and consisted of procedures (a high proportion of which were injections) and clinical treatments (mainly advice on medication and counselling about RA). Referrals were provided at a higher than average rate for BEACH (15 per 100 RA problems, compared with 9 per



100 total problems), and most were to rheumatologists. Pathology tests were ordered at almost double the average rate (67 per 100 RA problems, compared with 31 per 100 total problems), but imaging orders were less common than average (Table 1).

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## References

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**Table 1. Treatments for rheumatoid arthritis**

Treatment	Number	Rate per 100 RA problems	Proportion of each treatment (%)
<b>Medications</b>	723	101.0	100.0
Methotrexate	161	22.5	22.3
Hydroxychloroquine	61	8.5	8.4
Prednisolone	52	7.3	7.2
Paracetamol	48	6.7	6.6
Oxycodone	44	6.1	6.1
<b>Other treatments</b>	188	26.3	100.0
Injections	68	9.5	36.1
Medication advice	32	4.5	17.0
Counselling	29	4.1	15.4
<b>Referrals</b>	104	14.5	100.0
Rheumatologist	62	8.7	59.6
<b>Pathology tests</b>	477	66.6	100.0
Full blood count	113	15.8	23.7
C-reactive protein	73	10.2	15.3
<b>Imaging</b>	32	4.5	100.0