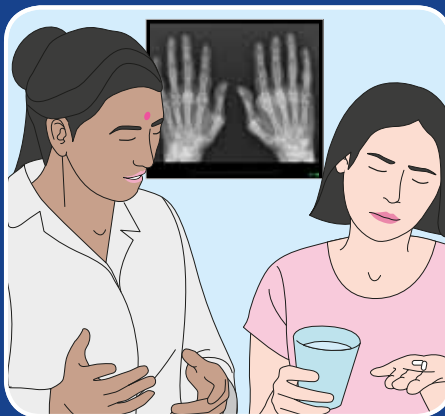
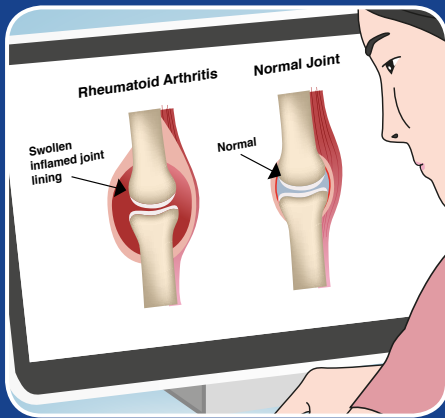


# Explaining Rheumatoid Arthritis





My husband and I love kids. We have a 2-year-old son and we will be welcoming our little princess soon.

That's great!

I'm building a castle.

**Two weeks later...**

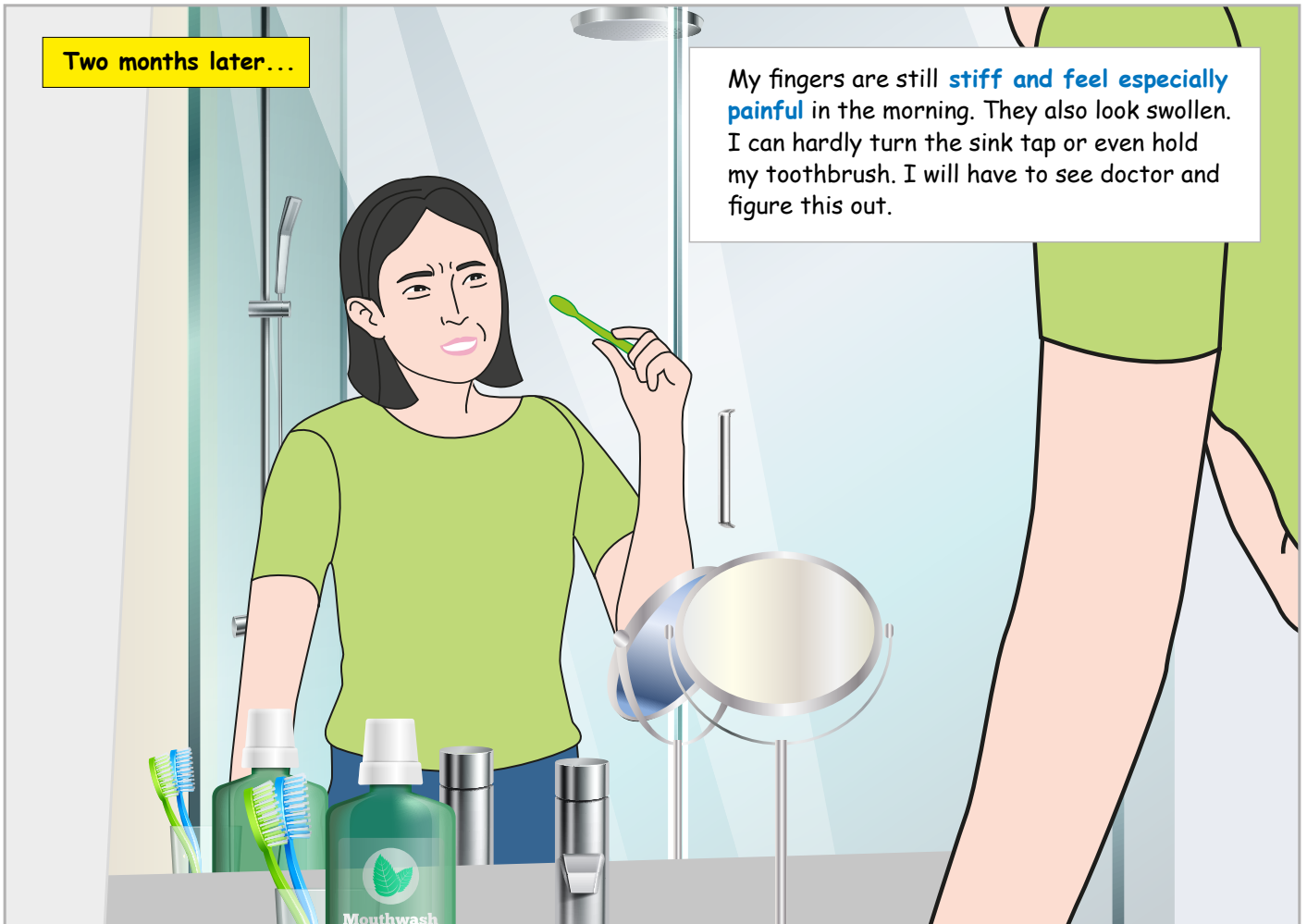
Our little baby girl has arrived. Simon and I are so blessed to have two new little hands for us to hold, but my fingers are **swollen and too painful** for me to carry her even she is crying.



I'll grab you some painkillers.

Two months later...

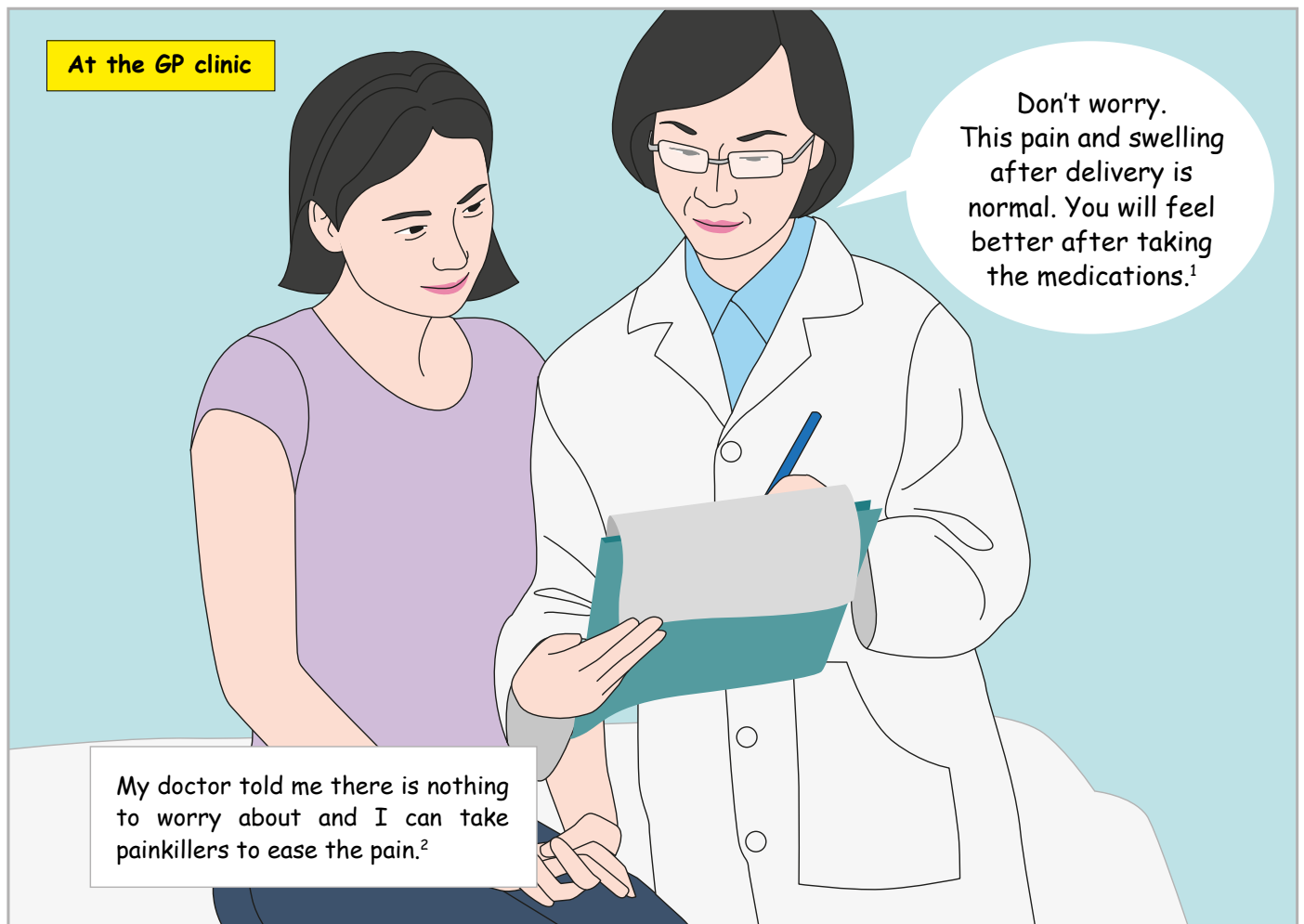
My fingers are still **stiff and feel especially painful** in the morning. They also look swollen. I can hardly turn the sink tap or even hold my toothbrush. I will have to see doctor and figure this out.

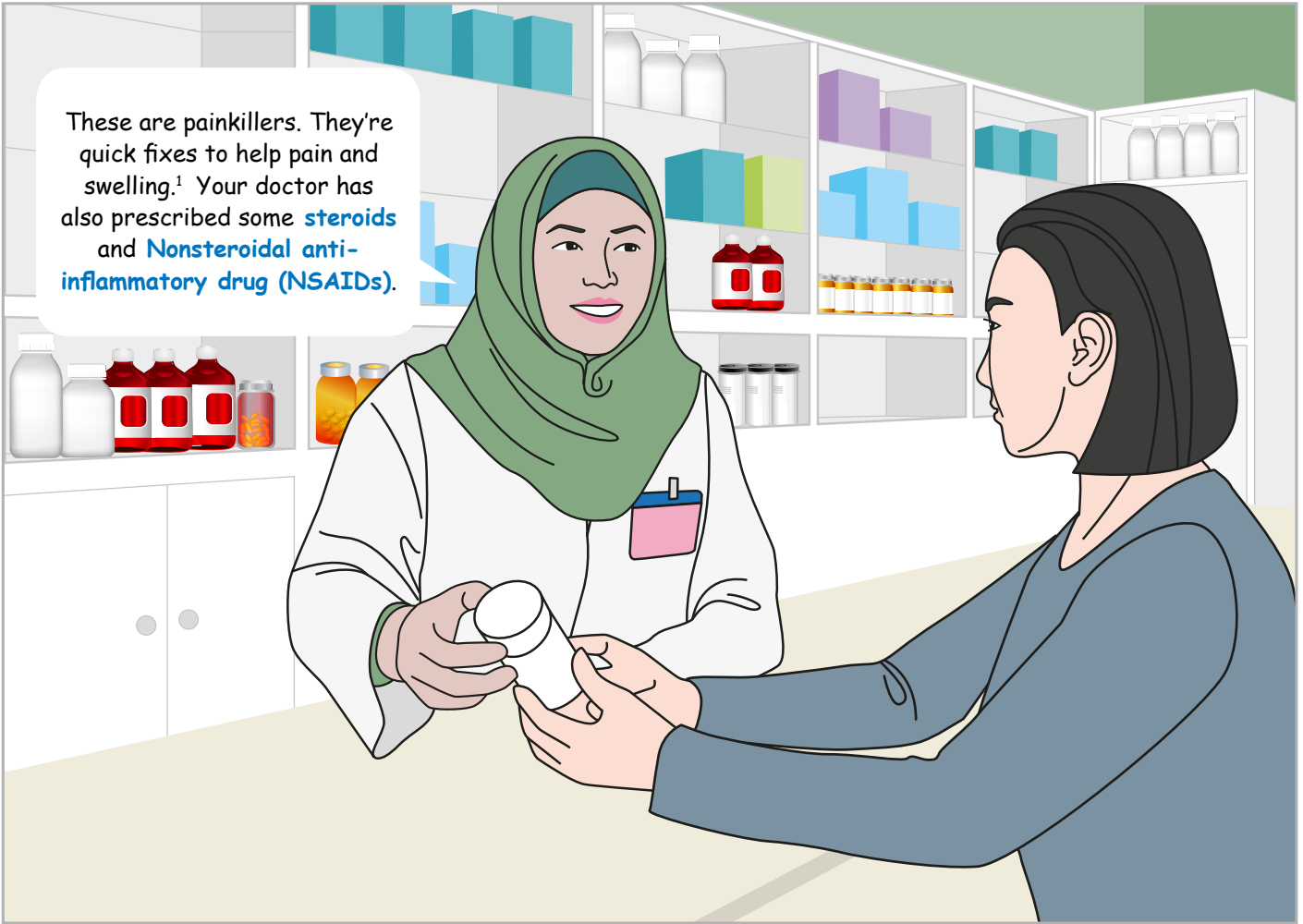


At the GP clinic

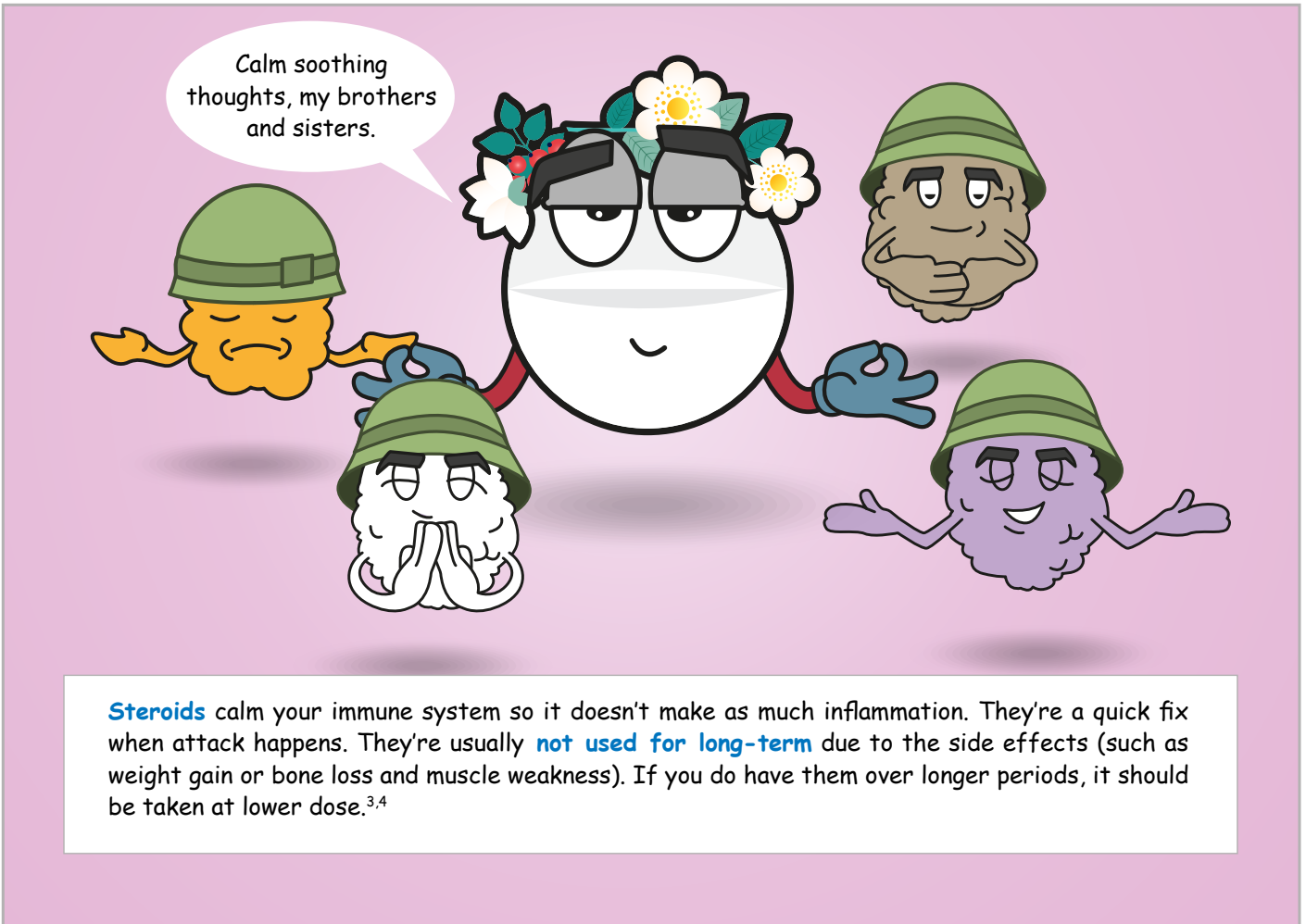
Don't worry. This pain and swelling after delivery is normal. You will feel better after taking the medications.<sup>1</sup>

My doctor told me there is nothing to worry about and I can take painkillers to ease the pain.<sup>2</sup>



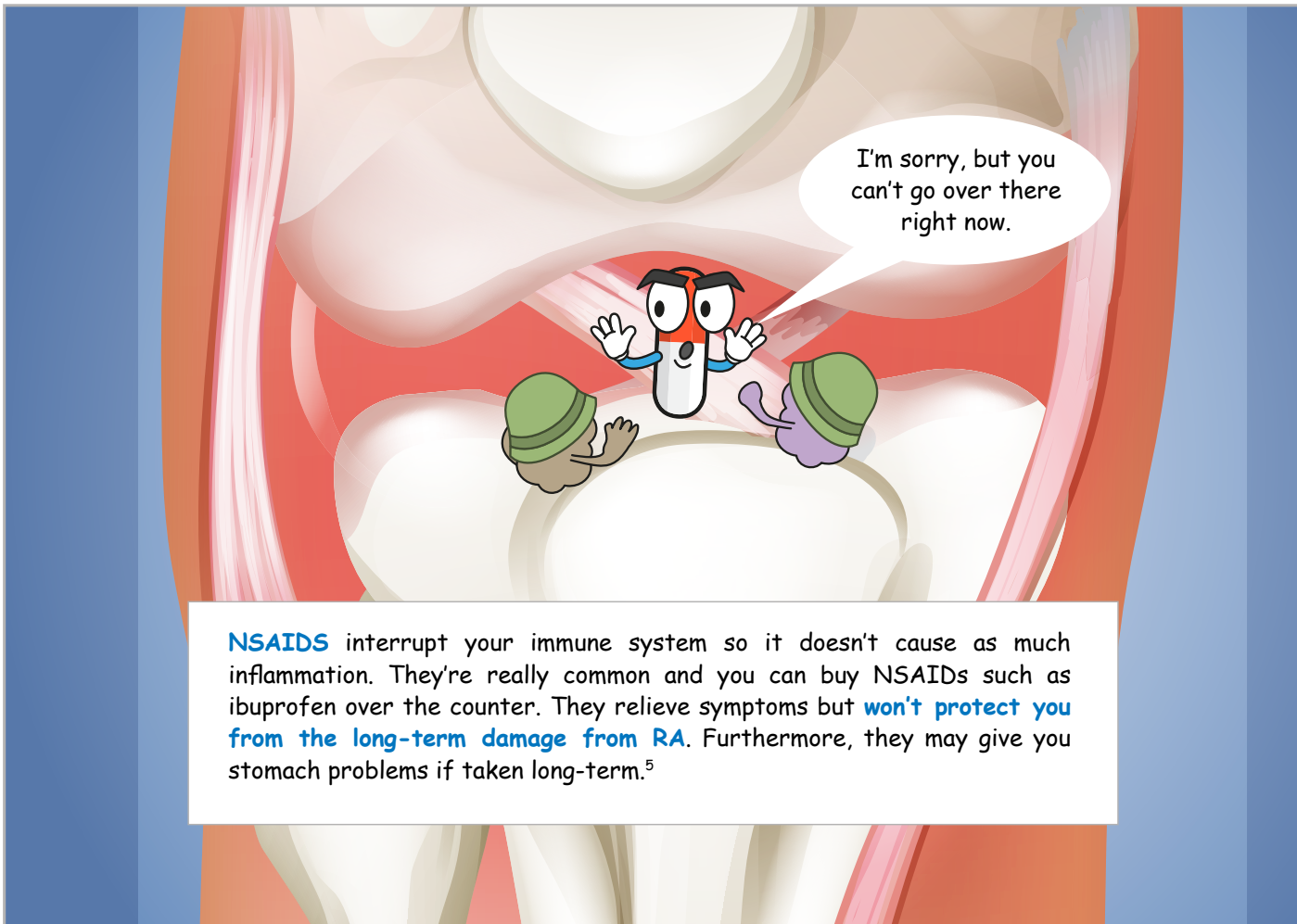


These are painkillers. They're quick fixes to help pain and swelling.<sup>1</sup> Your doctor has also prescribed some **steroids** and **Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug (NSAIDs)**.



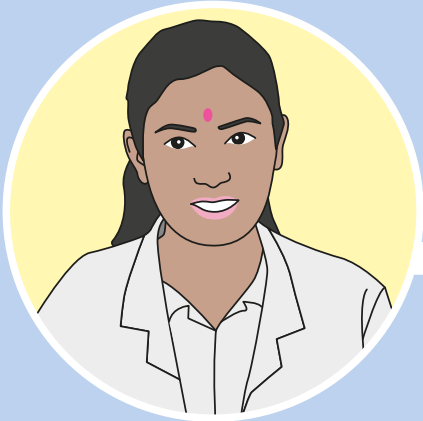
Calm soothing thoughts, my brothers and sisters.

**Steroids** calm your immune system so it doesn't make as much inflammation. They're a quick fix when attack happens. They're usually **not used for long-term** due to the side effects (such as weight gain or bone loss and muscle weakness). If you do have them over longer periods, it should be taken at lower dose.<sup>3,4</sup>



**NSAIDs** interrupt your immune system so it doesn't cause as much inflammation. They're really common and you can buy NSAIDs such as ibuprofen over the counter. They relieve symptoms but **won't protect you from the long-term damage from RA**. Furthermore, they may give you stomach problems if taken long-term.<sup>5</sup>

**At second GP clinic**



My condition did not improve even after taking medications. I went to seek for a second opinion and my doctor refers me to see a rheumatologist as I was having **severe joint pain**.

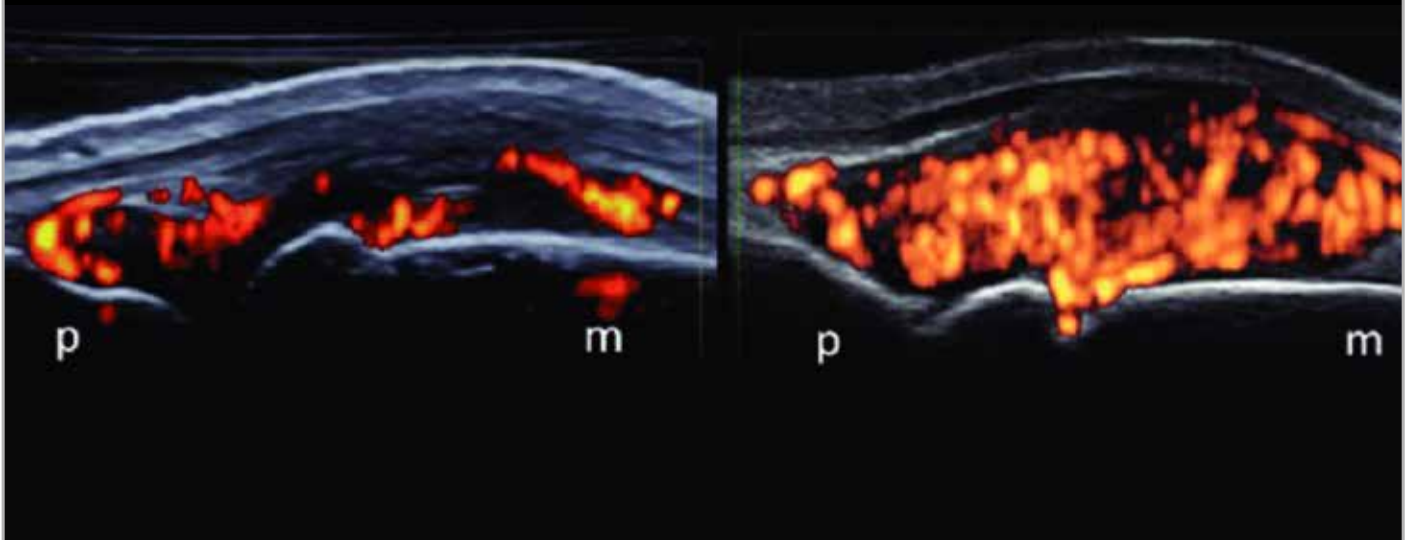
At the rheumatologist clinic

Based on your symptoms, along with the imaging and blood tests, we will find out more about your **Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA) Disease Activity**.<sup>4,6,7</sup>

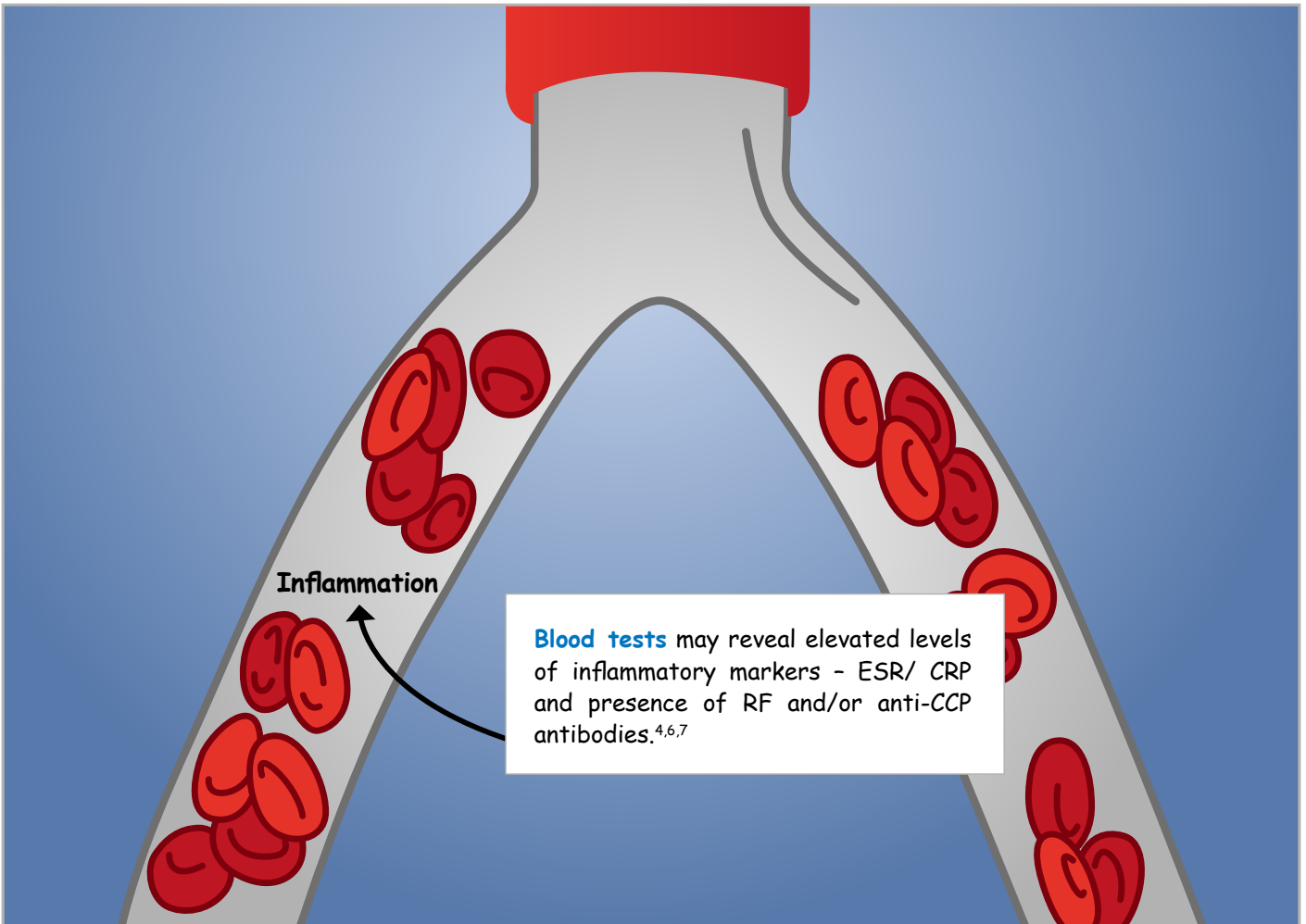
I was asked to get some examinations done including blood test, X-ray, and ultrasound to check my general well-being and RA disease activities.<sup>4,6,7</sup>

An **X-ray** is a quick, painless test to determine if there are any damages, or changes to the shape of your bones or joints.<sup>4,6,7</sup>

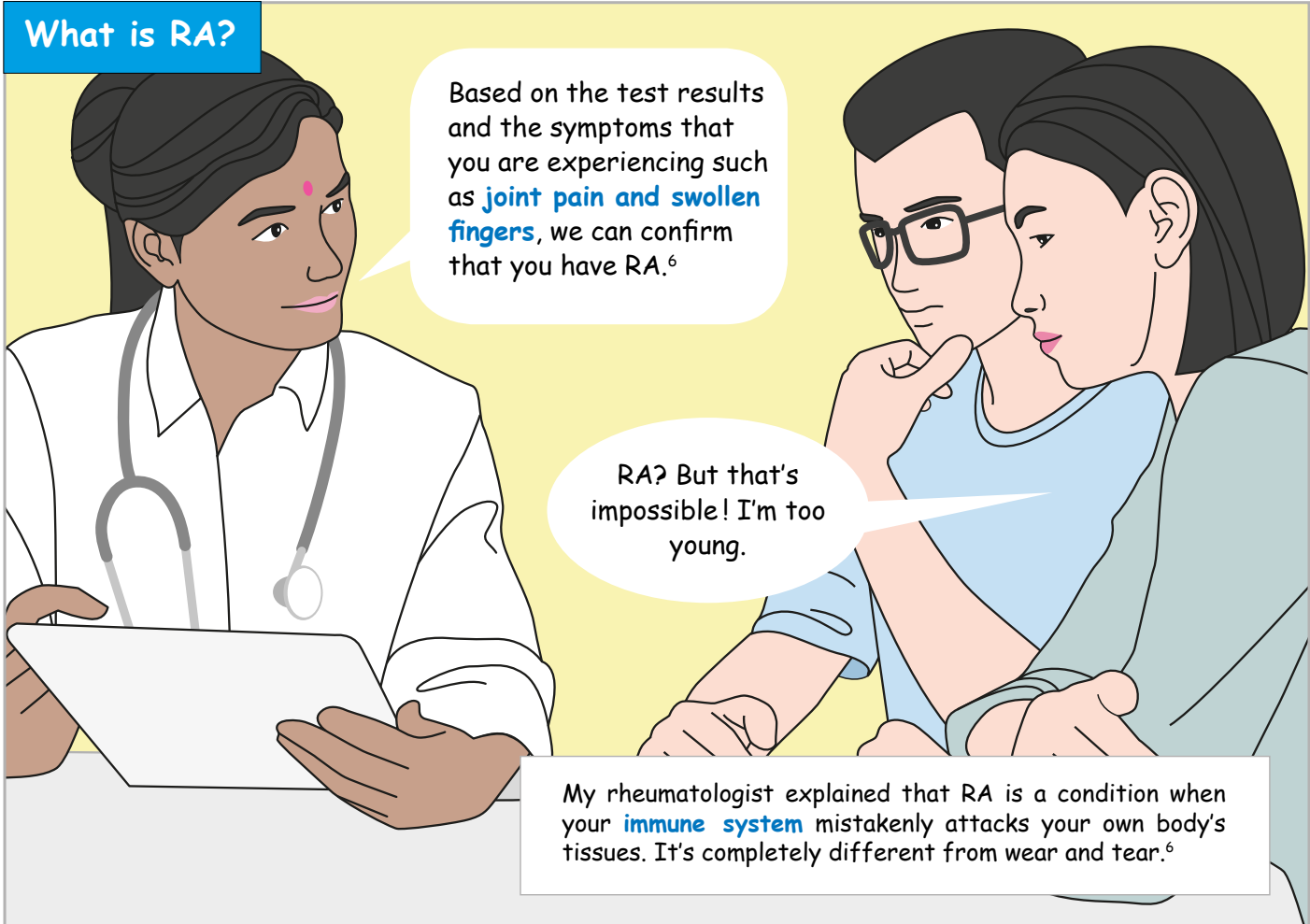




An **ultrasound** bounces sound waves off your bones and organs to create a picture. It is good at detecting if there are any swellings in your joints.<sup>4,6,7</sup>




## What is RA?



Based on the test results and the symptoms that you are experiencing such as **joint pain and swollen fingers**, we can confirm that you have RA.<sup>6</sup>

RA? But that's impossible! I'm too young.

My rheumatologist explained that RA is a condition when your **immune system** mistakenly attacks your own body's tissues. It's completely different from wear and tear.<sup>6</sup>



Will the medicine help with my pain?

There isn't a cure for RA yet but we can help to improve your conditions and **aim to keep you in remission**.<sup>8</sup>

Apparently without treatment, symptoms can get worse over time. This can cause **damage to your joints** or **long term problems** in other parts of your body.<sup>6</sup>



Normally, I will start with a medication, called **Conventional Synthetic Disease-modifying Antirheumatic drugs (csDMARDs)**. These type of medications **suppress your immune system to stop inflammation**. This **reduces your pain and swelling**. It stops your RA from getting worse.<sup>9,10</sup>

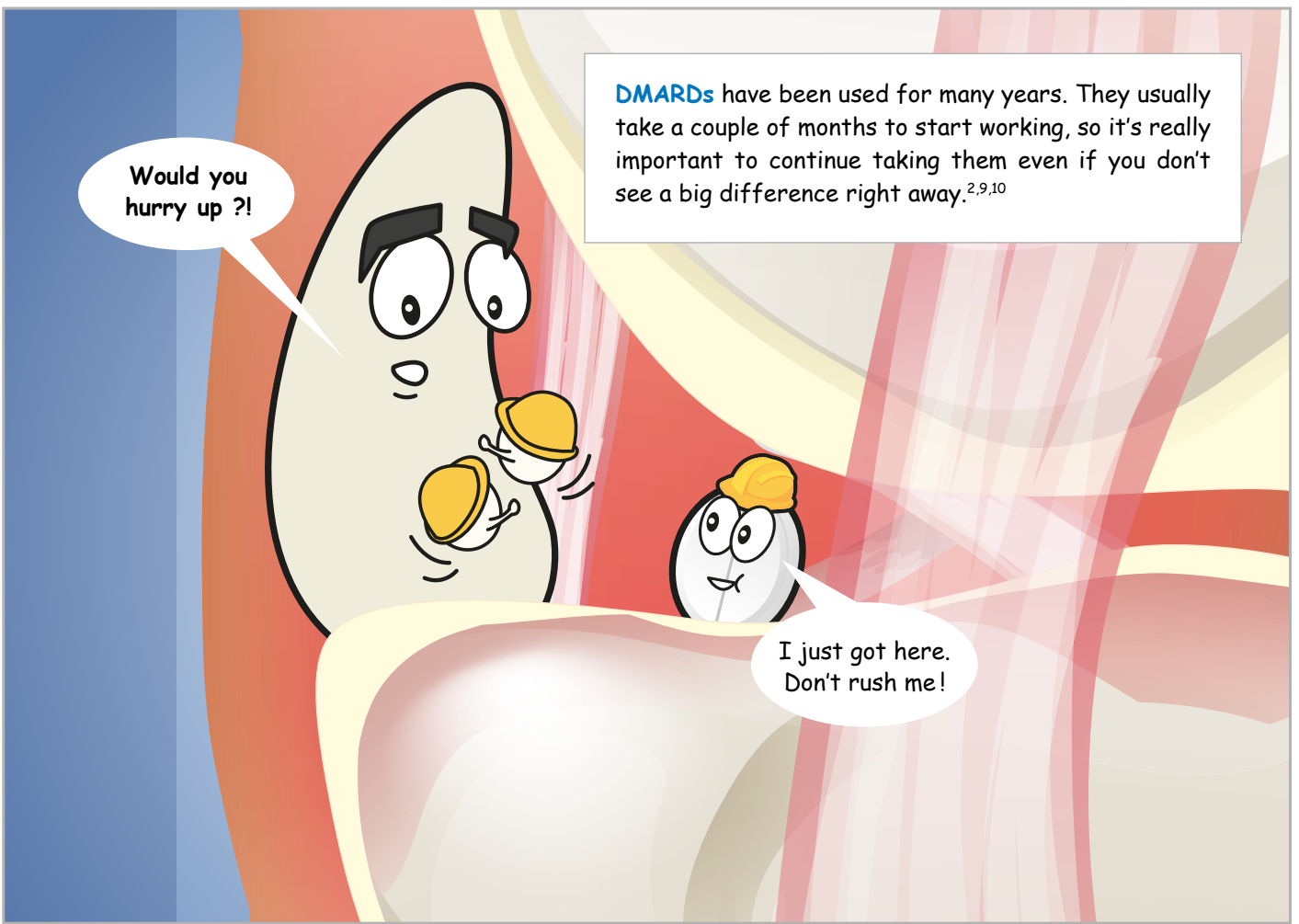
- 1 **Relieve Symptoms**
- 2 **Prevent Attacks**

I found out that the medications used to treat RA will not only treat symptoms but more importantly, will also stop the immune system from attacking in the the joints.<sup>2,6,9</sup>

**IMMUNE  
SYSTEM**

HEY!  
LET ME OUT!

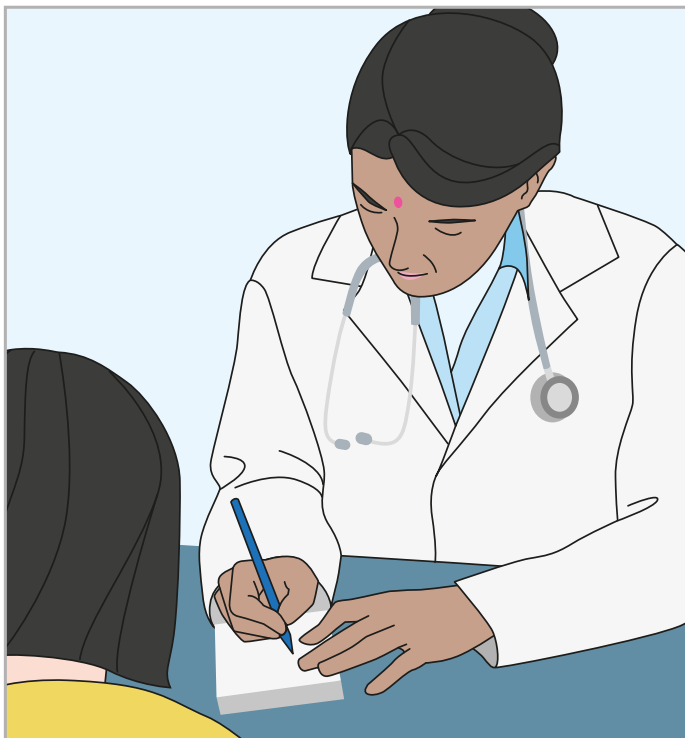
**DMARD** treatments are quite broad, so they block the most common immune cells from causing trouble.<sup>2,9,10</sup>



Would you hurry up ?!

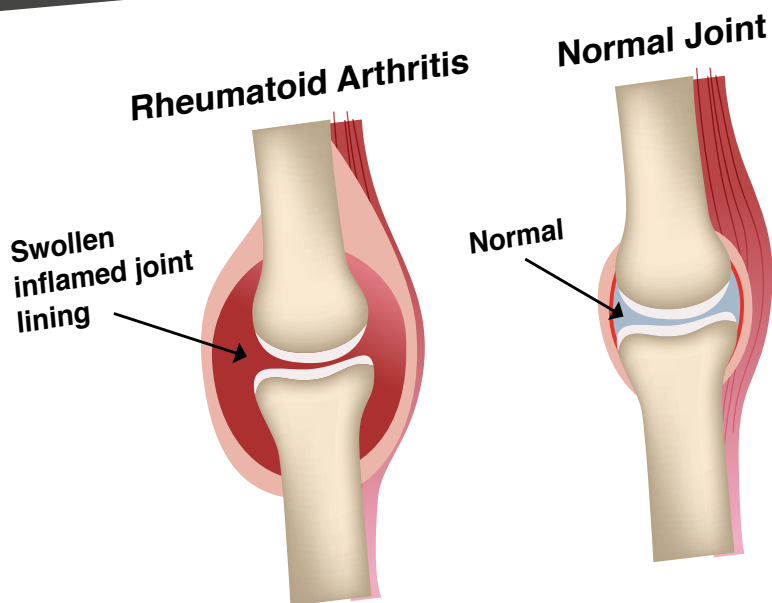
**DMARDs** have been used for many years. They usually take a couple of months to start working, so it's really important to continue taking them even if you don't see a big difference right away.<sup>2,9,10</sup>

I just got here.  
Don't rush me!



DMARDs have **side effects**, which you may experience such as nausea, stomach discomfort, mouth ulcers, or effects to your internal organs such as liver.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, you are required to have **regular blood tests** to monitor for these and also are encouraged to inform your doctor if you have any issues with your medications. Most patients tolerate DMARDs well.<sup>2</sup>

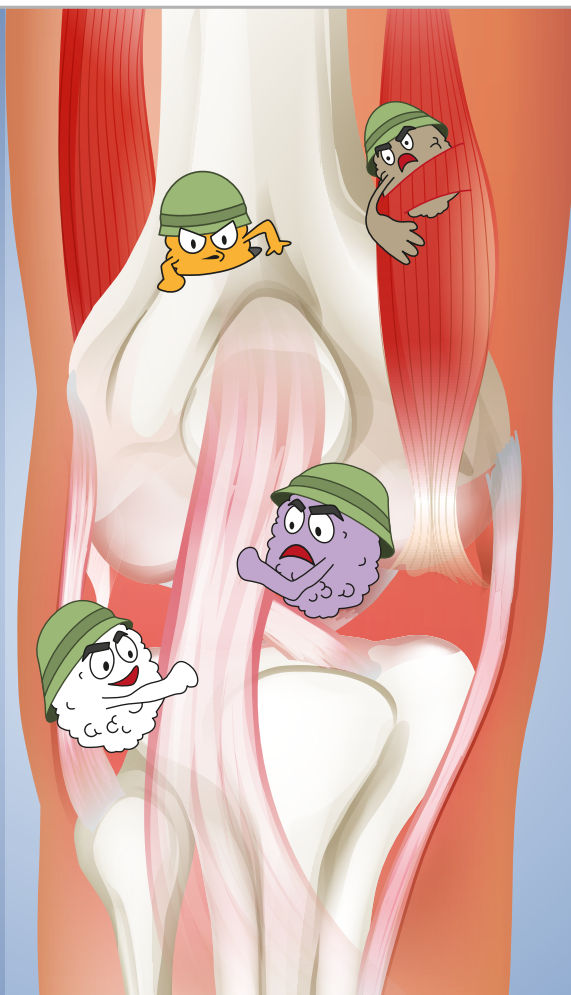
Later that night...

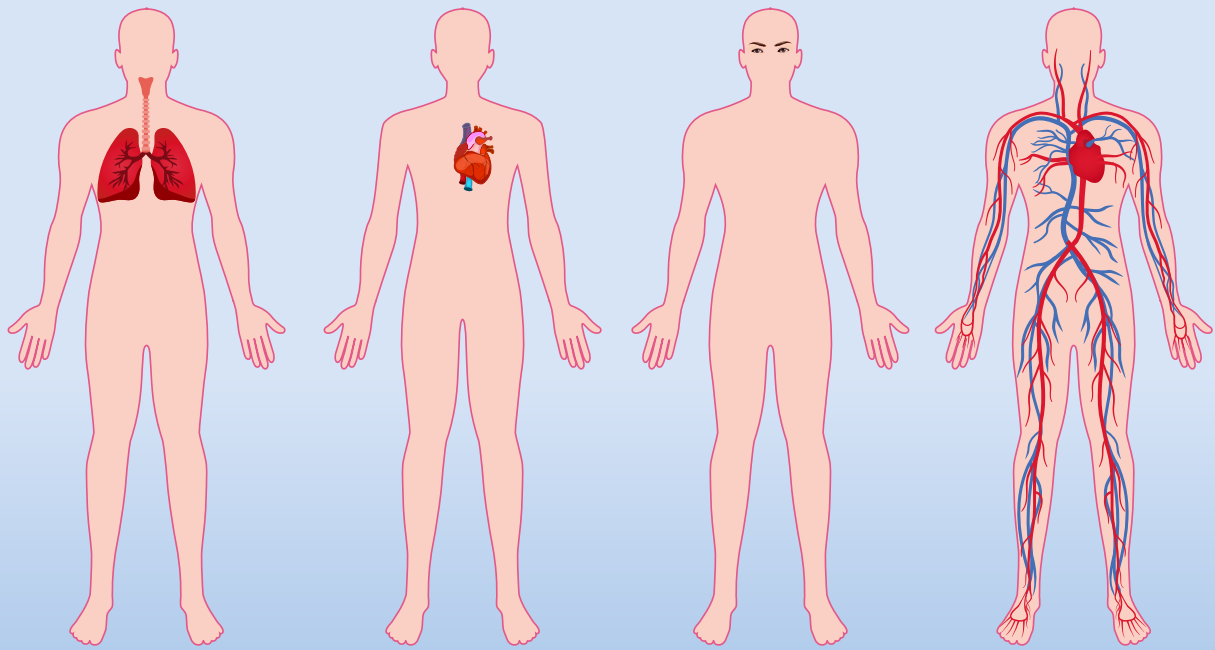


RA signs and symptoms include **joint pain, soreness and stiffness**.<sup>6</sup> When the condition becomes more active and the symptoms worsen, it's known as a **"flare" or a "flare-up."**<sup>6,8</sup> Other times, there may be **periods of calm** when there are **no symptoms** at all and we called this **remission**.<sup>6,8</sup>

I decided to find more information about RA.

If left untreated and the condition worsens, RA can invade and destroy, it can **invade and destroy cartilage and bone inside your joint**.<sup>6</sup> It can also **weaken the tendons and ligaments** that hold the joint together, which makes them **lose their shape**.<sup>6</sup>





**Lungs**

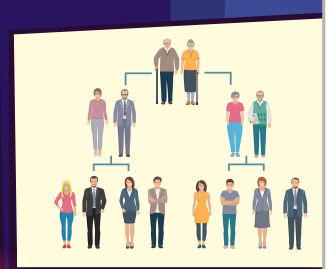
**Heart**

**Eyes**

**Blood vessels**

In rare but severe cases, if you don't stop the inflammation in RA, it may affect your **lungs, heart, eyes, or blood vessels**.<sup>6</sup>

Nobody knows what causes your immune system to become confused and attack your joints. However, there are also some triggers being described including common **infections, allergies, pregnancy, and it can also run in families**.<sup>4,6,11</sup>





Honey, we are going to get through this together. I am confident that the rheumatologist will be able to help you.

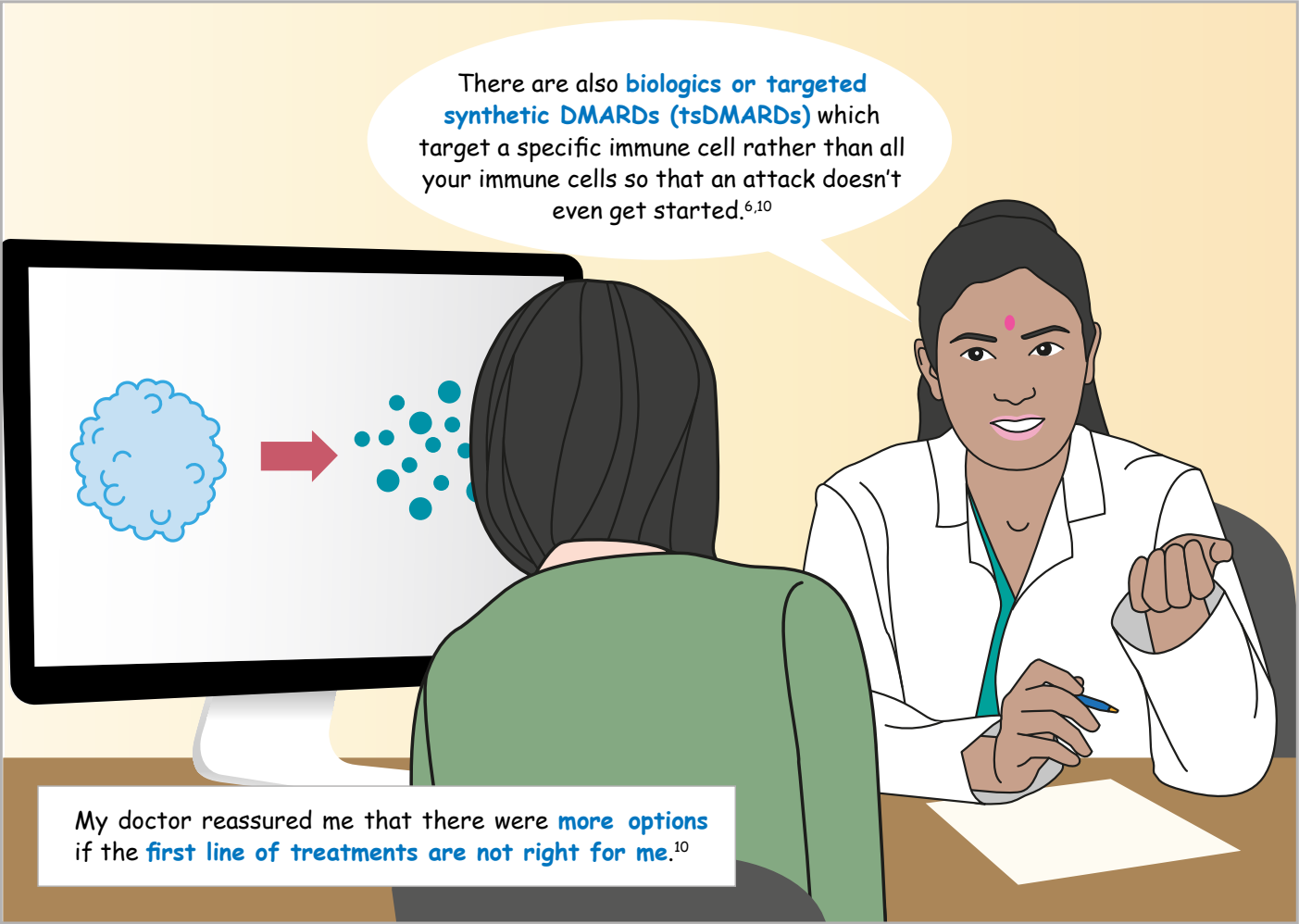


2 months later...

The current medication that I am taking is not able to control my symptoms despite adhering to it. My condition remains the same and I feel fatigued. I am upset and I find it hard to stay positive.

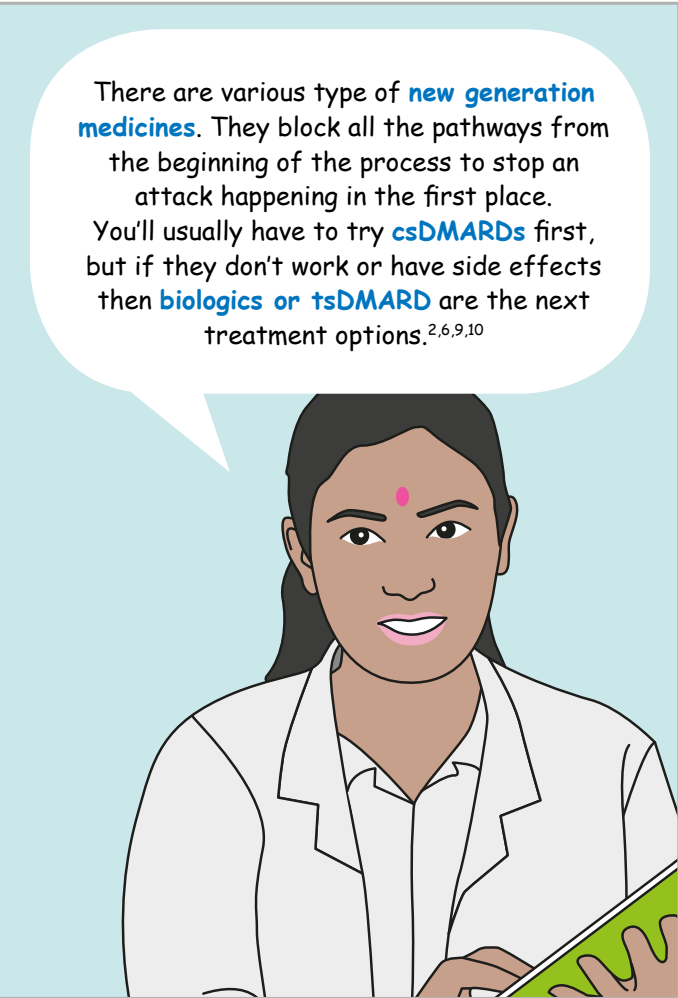
How are you? Feeling better after your treatment?

Even now, I still have swollen and tender joints, but my rheumatologist is confident to **help me to improve my symptoms.**




There are also **biologics or targeted synthetic DMARDs (tsDMARDs)** which target a specific immune cell rather than all your immune cells so that an attack doesn't even get started.<sup>6,10</sup>

My doctor reassured me that there were **more options** if the **first line of treatments are not right for me**.<sup>10</sup>



There are various type of **new generation medicines**. They block all the pathways from the beginning of the process to stop an attack happening in the first place. You'll usually have to try **csDMARDs** first, but if they don't work or have side effects then **biologics or tsDMARD** are the next treatment options.<sup>2,6,9,10</sup>



These are very useful suggestions. I will try it along with my **new medicines**.

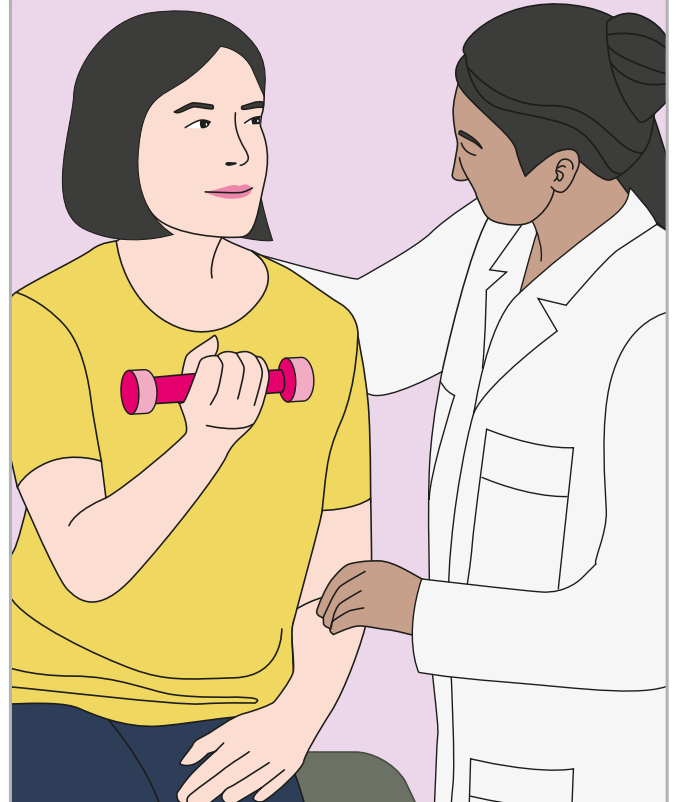
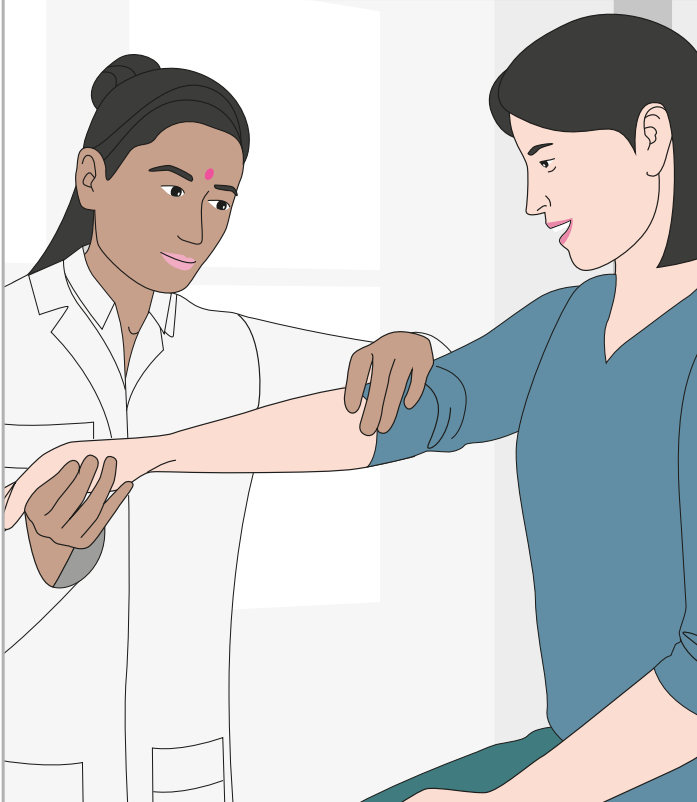
At my rheumatologist's suggestion, I also looked into various alternative treatments to improve my symptoms.

Met another RA patient in clinic waiting area. She shared about her experiences on trying different medicines.

Hi, I'm Sarah. I am also diagnosed with RA.

I had tried few treatments along the way. The new generation medicines work well on me. But most importantly is to follow your rheumatologist's prescription. **Be compliant** and **take the medications as prescribed.**<sup>12</sup>

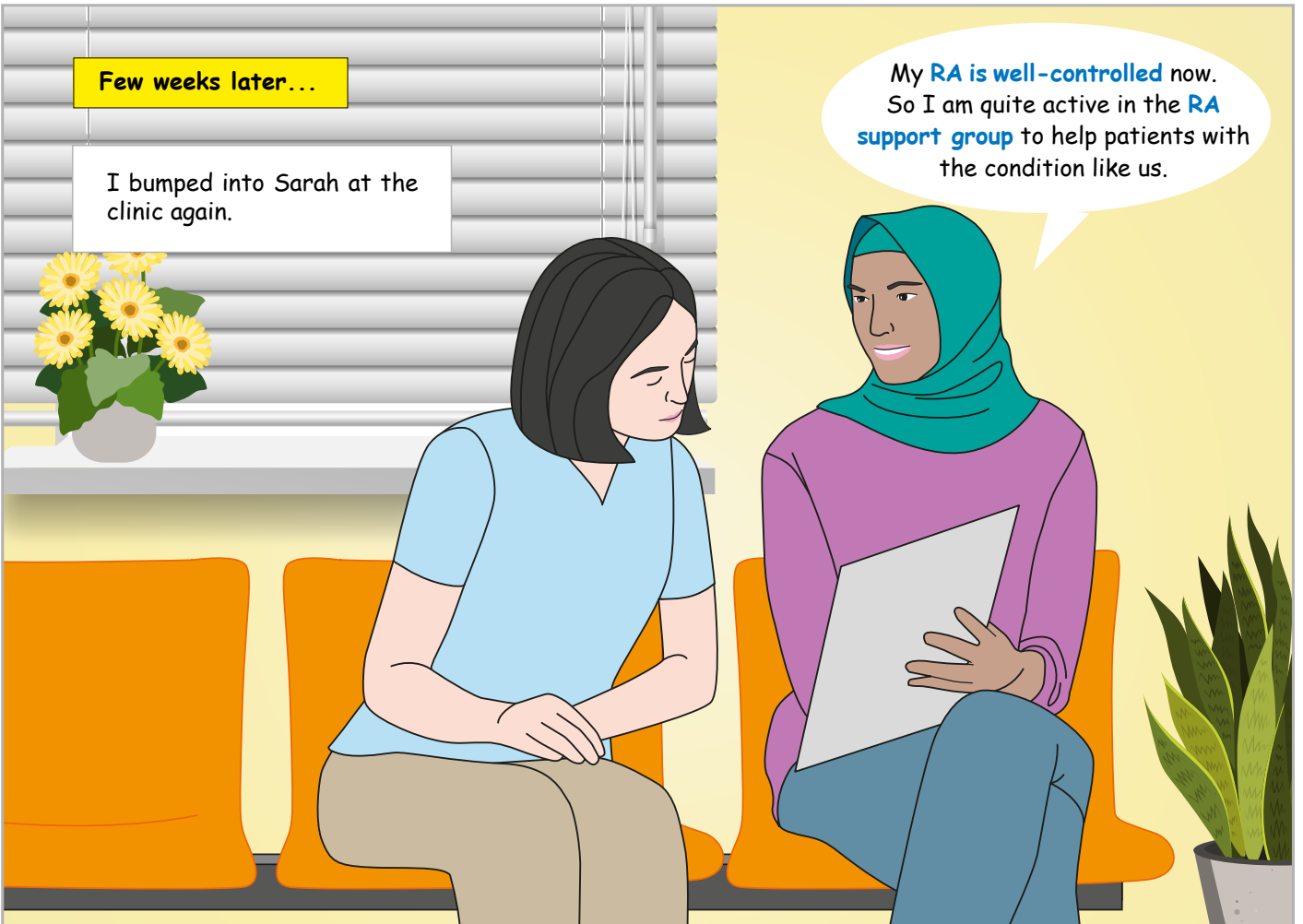
And my rheumatologist was right! Both **physiotherapy** and **occupational therapy** help to **build muscle strength** that can **ease pressure** on my joints. The pain reduced.<sup>13</sup>



Few weeks later...

I bumped into Sarah at the clinic again.

My RA is well-controlled now. So I am quite active in the RA support group to help patients with the condition like us.

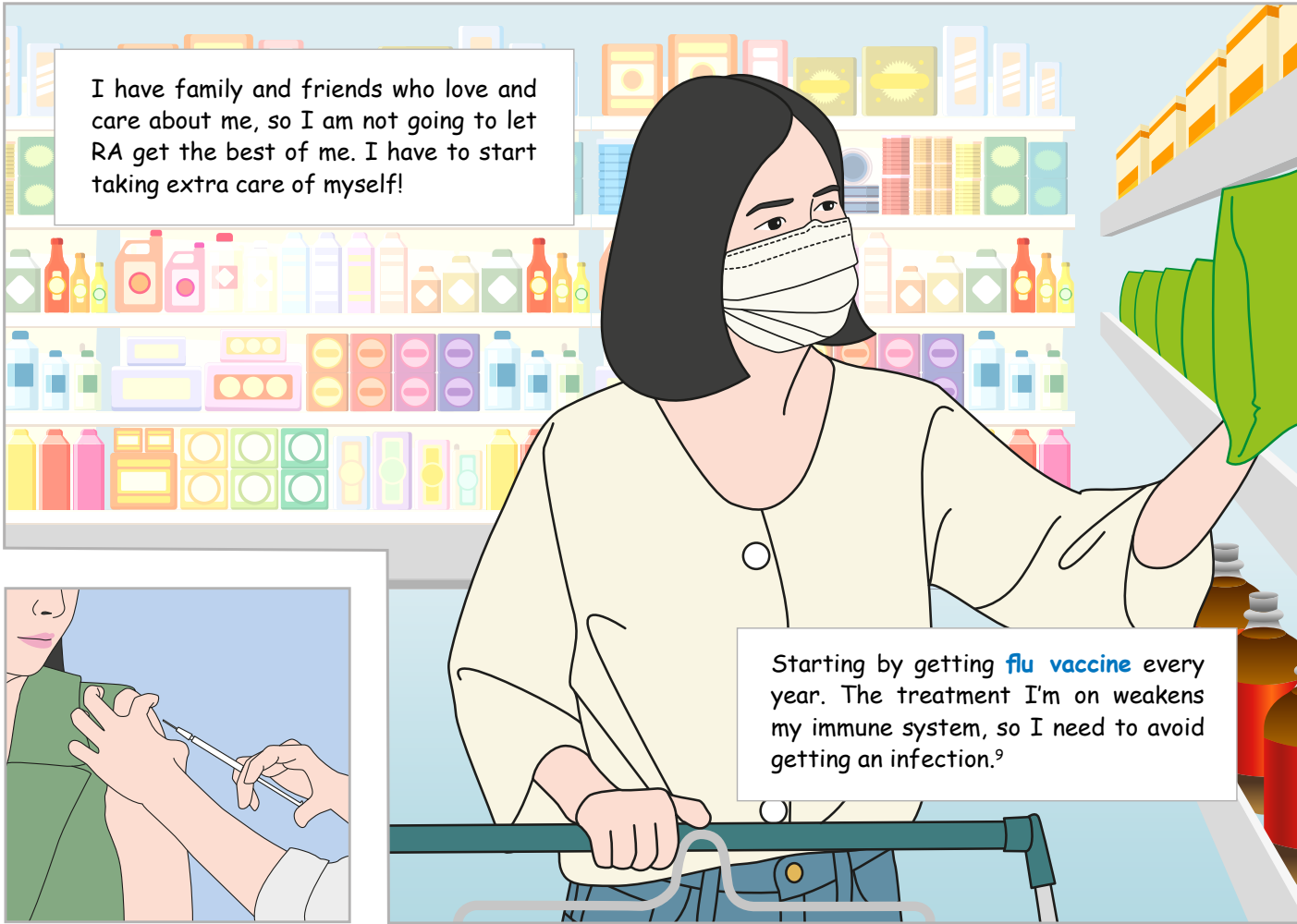


One month later...

Simon and I joined the RA support group to meet new people. It felt good being around with people who can understand and experienced what i am going through. Even Simon made some new friends who can support him.







I have family and friends who love and care about me, so I am not going to let RA get the best of me. I have to start taking extra care of myself!

Starting by getting **flu vaccine** every year. The treatment I'm on weakens my immune system, so I need to avoid getting an infection.<sup>9</sup>



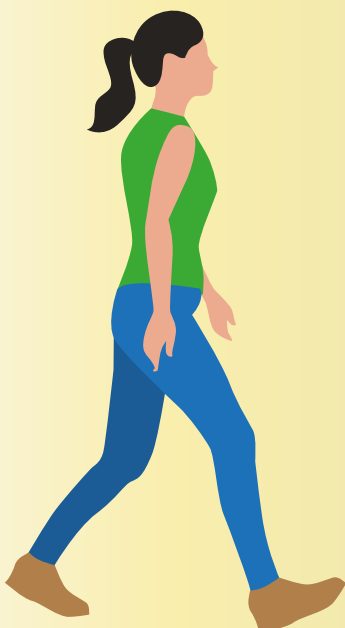
Simon and I have a new hobby of cooking together and looking up new **healthy recipes**. We're eating low fat and high fiber meals with lots of green leafy veggies.

At first, I didn't think I'd be able to exercise, but it's actually really important to stay active and healthy. I just have to find the **right exercise for myself**. Resting can make my joints stiff and hard to move, so I'm finding the right balance.<sup>6</sup> A family trip to the pool is perfect!

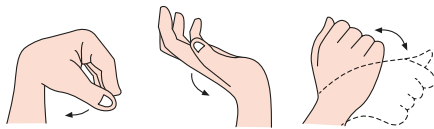


High impact sports like football or some martial arts may be worth avoiding, but **swimming, walking and cycling are great!**<sup>14</sup>

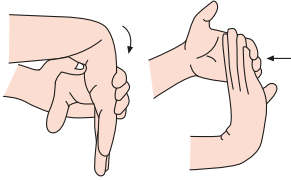
Regardless of what it is, find something that you enjoy and will keep doing because it's very important to stay active. Always warm up and start exercise gradually.<sup>14</sup> If you find a particular exercise causes a flare-up or makes your joints warm and swollen, stop it and rest.<sup>6</sup>



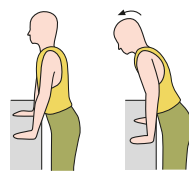
## Occupational therapy<sup>15</sup>



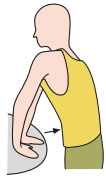
Wrist: Active range of motion



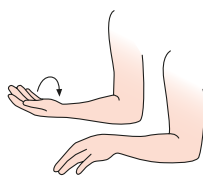
Wrist stretch



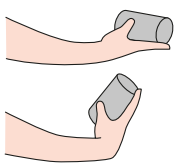
Wrist extension stretch



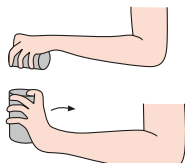
Wrist flexion stretch



Pronation & supination of the forearm



Wrist flexion exercise



Wrist extension exercise



Grip strengthening

## Physiotherapy<sup>16</sup>



Straight-leg raise (lying)



Knee squats



Leg cross



Straight-leg raise (sitting)



Leg stretch



Step ups

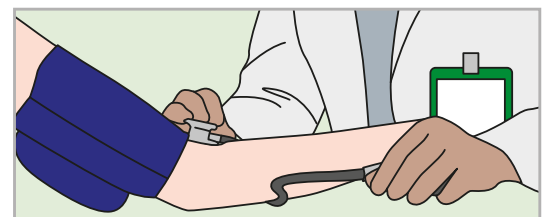
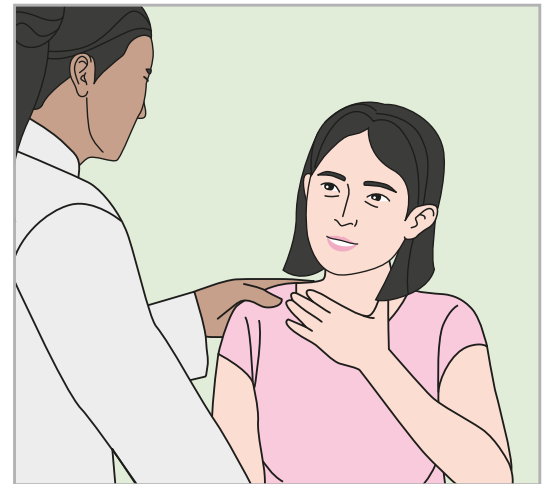


Sit/stand



Both therapies help to **reduce the joints pain, improve the strengths and flexibility of the joints.** Now, you get a full range of motion of your joints.<sup>13</sup>

Sometimes it's very challenging to continue the medications. But with the support from my doctor, I know that taking medications as prescribed is very important.<sup>12</sup>



My all-time concern is always about the medication's side effects. But my doctor highlighted to me that the **benefits of damage prevention** is way greater than the risks associated with the medication. The doctor will monitor my condition, concerns as well as any side effects that may arise.<sup>17</sup>



My joint pain reduces and it doesn't interfere with my day-to-day living. I can drive without asking my husband now!

RA is a long-term, auto-immune condition where your body's immune system attacks your joints.<sup>6</sup>

There are a lot of treatments out there ! They all block a different pathway to stop inflammation. It may take a while but you'll find the one that works for you !<sup>6</sup>

It's important to **get on treatment** and **stay on it** to prevent long term damage and **get into remission**.<sup>8</sup>

Always **talk to your doctor** about the side effects, fatigue or flares so they can help.<sup>6,8</sup>

**Keep exercising and stay healthy!** You can learn to live with this condition and have a healthy, active lifestyle!<sup>6</sup>

One year later...

Doctor, what's your advice if we want to have more kids?

Her RA is now **well-controlled**, so it should be okay. Many women go into **remission** during pregnancy and continue to do well after their baby is born. However, certain medicines are not safe to take during pregnancy.<sup>18,19</sup>

It is very important to **discuss with your doctor** to find the best way to treat your RA if you're planning to have a baby.<sup>18,19</sup>

With the right treatment and prenatal care, babies born to moms with RA are as **healthy and happy** as any.<sup>19</sup>

## A guide to making the most of your visit and not settling for "good enough"



**Speak up and share** with your doctor to manage your RA together<sup>20</sup>



**Prepare in advance and prioritize questions**

- Always have updates and questions ready before the consultation<sup>20</sup>



**You know yourself best**

- Acknowledge the expert in you by trusting your instincts and be honest when sharing with your doctor about your condition and symptoms<sup>20</sup>



**Be specific and honest**

- Try to describe and elaborate about your RA symptoms rather than simply stating "fine", "good" or "okay" so that your doctor can learn more about your symptoms<sup>20</sup>



**Set goals**

- Discuss progress toward goals at each visit to track the management of your RA<sup>20</sup>



# Acknowledgement

We would like to express our gratitude and appreciation to the following Rheumatologists for their contribution to provide their valuable input and feedback:

**Dato' Dr Gun Suk Chyn,**  
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**Dr Shereen Ch'ng SuYin,**  
Hospital Selayang

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