

Supporting Students with Rheumatic Disease:

A Guide for Teachers and Counselors

Students living with rheumatic disease may look fine on the outside while managing symptoms that can affect energy, movement, concentration, attendance, and participation throughout the school day. The most common rheumatic diseases are juvenile idiopathic arthritis (JIA), alongside other diseases like lupus, juvenile dermatomyositis, vasculitis, and periodic fever syndromes. This quick guide outlines practical ways school staff can support students during everyday routines, symptom flares, and changes in physical or emotional well-being.

What School Staff Should Know

Rheumatic diseases can affect children and teens in different ways. Symptoms may vary from day to day, and a student's needs can change even when they are trying hard to keep up.

Common challenges may include:

- Fatigue that makes it harder to focus, participate, or stay engaged throughout an entire school day.
- Joint pain, stiffness, or swelling that affects writing, walking, sitting for long periods, or moving between classrooms.
- Flare days when symptoms suddenly worsen and extra flexibility is needed.
- Stress, frustration, anxiety, or isolation related to managing a chronic health condition at school.

Fatigue Support

Fatigue is more than feeling tired. It can affect concentration, memory, stamina, and classroom participation.

Helpful strategies include:

- Allow short rest breaks as needed.

- Provide extra time for assignments, tests, and transitions.
- Share notes, slides, or recorded instruction when available.
- Reduce unnecessary physical demands during low-energy days.
- Check in privately if a student seems unusually drained or overwhelmed.

Mobility Support

Pain, stiffness, or limited mobility can make school routines more difficult, especially early in the day or during flares.

Helpful strategies include:

- Allow extra time between classes.
- Offer elevator access or route adjustments when needed.
- Seat the student where they can move comfortably and access materials easily.
- Permit the use of mobility aids or supportive equipment.
- Modify physical activities when participation is limited or unsafe.

Flare Days

A flare can increase pain, fatigue, stiffness, or other symptoms with little warning. A student who was doing well one day may need immediate flexibility the next.

On flare days, consider:

- Excused tardies, absences, or nurse visits when symptoms interfere with attendance.
- Adjusted workloads or extended deadlines.
- Alternate ways to complete classwork or participate in projects.
- A reduced physical load, including help carrying materials or limiting prolonged activity.
- Clear communication with the family, school nurse, counselor, or designated support staff.

Classroom Accommodations

Students may benefit from formal accommodations under a 504 Plan or Individualized Education Program (IEP), depending on individual needs.

Possible accommodations include:

- Flexible attendance policies.
- Extra time for tests and assignments.
- Access to class notes or digital materials.
- Modified handwriting demands, including keyboard use.
- Preferential seating.
- Rest breaks during the school day.
- Permission to carry water, snacks, medication, or comfort items as appropriate.
- Flexibility in physical education, recess, field trips, or other movement-based activities.

How Counselors Can Help

Counselors play an important role in supporting a student's emotional well-being, self-advocacy, and school experience.

Counselors can:

- Help students communicate their needs with confidence.
- Support re-entry after absences or extended medical leave.
- Watch for signs of stress, anxiety, social withdrawal, or academic strain.
- Coordinate with teachers, families, nurses, and administrators.
- Reinforce that asking for support is a strength, not a setback.

A Supportive Approach Matters

Small adjustments can make a big difference while at school. Flexibility, empathy, and open communication help students with rheumatic disease stay engaged, supported, and ready to learn. ■

