

Coping with an arthritis flare

An information guide



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Rheumatoid arthritis (RA), psoriatic arthritis, and lupus are chronic (long term) diseases. With treatment your symptoms may be kept at bay, but you may still have acute episodes of pain and inflammation, known as flares. An arthritis flare may occur after an infection, or after a highly stressful situation. Often, however, what triggers a flare is not clear. You may have long periods when your arthritis is quiet, or in remission. Then, suddenly, inflammation becomes more active. Remember that you have a range of treatments to address pain and fatigue.

Discuss a plan of action with a member of your rheumatology team. One approach would be to adjust your medications temporarily while the disease is in flare. This will not only relieve some of the pain associated with an arthritis flare, but also help minimize any damage that may occur from unchecked inflammation. Repeated flares could indicate that you need a more aggressive treatment approach.

Be aware that medication changes may not control the flare right away, or they may only have a limited effect on your flare. Of course you and your doctor should be in agreement about possible medication changes during an arthritis flare. Many doctors will suggest a plan that you can use at each flare's onset without having to seek his or her permission each time.

Along with following your doctor's recommendations, there are many self-care steps you can incorporate into your plan.

- **Balance periods of activity with periods of rest.** Although more rest can help during an arthritis flare, you probably do not need to abandon your regular activities or exercise program. However, you may need to modify your usual routine when you experience a flare. Spending long periods in bed is counterproductive. Instead, try to intersperse periods of rest with some light activity. Finally, to

keep joints from becoming stiff, move them through the fullest range of motion possible, gradually increasing your range as the flare subsides.

- **Have a plan to deal with your obligations.** Have a contingency plan both for work and family obligations. At work, try to arrange for coverage, work fewer hours per week or bring work home. Discuss your plan with supervisors and co-workers ahead of time, and assure them of your commitment. At home, plan to hand out a few chores among family members, and make sure everyone knows what they are expected to do to keep things running smoothly.
- **Communicate with your family and friends.** The time to let your family and friends know that you may need more help is when things are going well. When a flare occurs, if someone volunteers to help you, give them a specific job. Otherwise, well-intentioned offers of assistance go unused. Other sources of help, such as members of your religious institution or community volunteer organisations, may be available to you as well.
- **Apply a hot or cold pack to inflamed joints.** Although heat can theoretically make inflammation worse, because it tends to increase blood flow and nerve sensitivity, some people find a warm pack soothing and pain relieving. Others get benefit from cold, which decreases blood flow to the inflamed area and lessens inflammation and muscle spasm.
- **Practice relaxation techniques.** These techniques work best when you do them on a regular basis. Even though relaxation may not directly reduce your pain, it can minimize stress, which will indirectly relieve your pain.
- **Call the Rheumatology advice line number** if your flare persists in excess of 7-10 days **01706 517233**.

If English is not your first language and you need help, please contact the Interpretation and Translation Service

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