

Owning your rheumatoid arthritis (RA)





You and RA: A partnership

RA forces you to adjust, touching every part of your life and the lives of those around you. But taking an active part in your RA—from your treatment to how you handle everyday situations—can make a difference.

There are simple ways to adjust aspects of your life to take back as much control as possible—not just physically, but emotionally as well. For every part of your life impacted by RA—from your relationships, to how you manage symptoms, to your lifestyle—there are ways for you to take control.

To start, **let's talk about it**

It's hard to talk about having RA. Many people don't even understand what it is, let alone the effects it has not just on your body but on your life. It's hard to talk about something that no one can see and only you can feel.

But after talking to your doctor about your RA, let's not underestimate the power of talking with friends and family. Starting with a simple, honest conversation can help everyone involved get on the same page and work as a team.

How much do you say?

It's up to you to decide who you talk with about your RA—it can be on a need-to-know basis, or just your close intimate circle. Just the same, it's up to you to decide how much to share.

You can be brief:
“It's an autoimmune disease that's attacking my joints.”

You can then explain how the symptoms affect you:
“RA means that I have a lot of pain and need extra rest sometimes.”

You can talk about it on a day-to-day basis:
“My RA is affecting my wrists today. Can you help me lift this?”

Different approaches for different people

Start at home:

Many people with RA admit that it puts a strain on their relationship with their partner. The best way to get ahead of it? **Talk about it.** Ask each other questions. Listen to each other. RA is now something you share, and it will affect both of you differently.

With young kids:

It can be scary, especially for children, to learn that RA isn't going away and may get worse. Reassure them that you have a doctor and family who support you, and most importantly, that you are doing everything in your power to take care of yourself.

With friends and coworkers:

You may choose not to bring up your RA at work, but it can be helpful to have people in your corner. With friends and coworkers, it's okay to explain why you may need to take a day to yourself or why you're asking for help. When they're on the same page, they can become both a resource and an advocate for you.

The important thing is to make it known that while RA is a part of you, it's not all of you.

What it really means to talk about your symptoms

Pain and fatigue have very different meanings when it comes to your RA. It may be hard for people to understand how these symptoms are different for you, but carefully describing how you feel can help paint a picture.

Explain

There's a difference between pain and chronic pain—it's not a stubbed toe or jammed finger. It's life-changing and hard to understand unless you experience it yourself.

Use the pain scale

It can work with your family and friends just as well as it does with your healthcare team. Let them know how you're feeling on a scale from 1 to 10 to give them something to compare to.

Expanding your support team

It's normal not to want to solely rely on your friends and family. There are local and nationwide resources available. If you'd like to get involved and meet new people in the RA community, search for events near you at www.arthritis.org/local-offices.

Pain levels are unpredictable

They can vary from day to day, and even change within the same day. Let the people close to you know that just because you wake up feeling one way doesn't mean it will stay that way.

Fatigue isn't just being sleepy

It's okay to point out that your fatigue is a result of your body working overtime all day and losing sleep because of pain, which can take a toll on you both mentally and physically.

These are just some ways to explain what you go through. While you shouldn't have to justify taking a rest or rescheduling plans, it is helpful to describe your feelings. If nothing else, you're educating your friends and family and setting expectations that work best for you.

For the caregivers

Hopefully your loved one won't hesitate to tell you when they're having a rough day.

But it can also help if you keep an eye out for things that may trigger symptoms to get worse.

Preparing for the tough days

There's talking about symptoms, and then there's acting on them.

In an ideal world, you could predict which days will be more difficult than others. Realistically, we know that's not the case. Sometimes on tough days, simple things like a hot shower and extra rest can do the trick. And then there are days when flares happen.

Being prepared in advance can help take a load off your mind.

Prep with your doctor

Have a plan of action ready at the first sign of a flare, so it doesn't get out of control quickly.

Have a plan for handling your obligations

Whether it's with coworkers or family, communication is key when it comes to transitioning responsibilities.

Avoid infections

Infections can trigger a flare, so be sure you're up to date with your vaccines, wash your hands, and avoid germs that could cause infections as best as possible.

Pay attention to warning signs

Catching it early is a key part of managing a flare.

Getting through a flare

In the heat of the moment, remember these few things that may help:



Find a balance

While you may be tempted to stay in bed, it's important to keep joints from getting stiff. Listen to your body when it comes to resting and moving during these times.



Go hot and cold

Heat increases blood flow to soothe joint pain, and also relaxes muscles. Cold constricts blood vessels and can ease inflammation.



Relax your mind

During a flare, meditation and visualization techniques can help minimize stress, which indirectly may help relieve your pain.



Remember—it will pass

And when it does, focus on the good days ahead to put the bad ones behind you.

Mind and body

Taking care of every part, every day

While RA obviously affects your body, it is important not to forget the toll it can take on you emotionally. These suggestions can be done alone, or with friends and family, to start taking control of how you think and feel with RA.

Practice mindfulness meditation

Mindfulness meditation is thought to increase clarity and calmness. The goal of this practice is to notice your thoughts and emotions and try to relate to them differently—with a sense of compassion for yourself and others—and keep your mind in the present moment. One study showed that, along with medical treatment, mindfulness meditation may help to improve symptoms of depression, psychological distress, and well-being in patients with RA.

Thinking about your **body**

Regular activity may help people with RA experience less pain, more energy, better sleep, and better day-to-day function.

Once you set your mind to starting a routine, set up time to talk with your doctor. Together, you can figure out how to modify exercises according to your symptoms, and learn how often to do them.

Thinking about the **kitchen**

Another aspect to be mindful of is a necessary one—eating. There are foods that may help, foods to avoid, and things to do around the kitchen that can make it all come together a little easier.

Before you get cooking:

- Invest in basic kitchen appliances, like electric jar or can openers and food processors, to help ease the burden of meal prepping
- Replace small drawer and cabinet knobs with larger, easy-to-grab ones
- Go for pots and pans with grips on both sides to make holding them easier

Foods to look for

It's always important to maintain a healthy diet. But when it comes to RA, some foods may be more beneficial than others, and can potentially help with some symptoms.



Fatty fish

are rich in omega-3 fatty acids which may be anti-inflammatory

herring
mackerel
trout
salmon



Low-fat dairy

supports bone health without the inflammation that full-fat dairy may cause

low-fat
cheese
milk
yogurt



Turmeric spice

may help to alleviate chronic pain and may also have anti-inflammatory effects



Olive oil

may help to suppress some symptoms, like pain, duration of morning stiffness, and grip strength

Foods to avoid

Be careful what you crave—there are some foods that may trigger more inflammation in your body.



Processed sugar

triggers the release of inflammatory messengers

desserts
pastries
candy
soda
fruit juices



Saturated fats

have been shown to trigger fat tissue inflammation

cheese
pizza
red meat
full-fat dairy products
pasta



Omega-6 fatty acids

can be pro-inflammatory if eaten too much

oils (corn, sunflower, soy, peanut)
mayonnaise
salad dressings



Refined carbohydrates

fuel the production of proteins that stimulate inflammation

white flour products (bread, crackers)
white rice
white potatoes
many cereals



MSG (monosodium glutamate)

may trigger chronic inflammation

flavor enhancer (Asian foods, soy sauce)
fast foods
soup mixes
deli meats

For the caregivers

The ones who are there through it all

If you're caring for someone with RA, you already know what it means to lend a helping hand. But different types and levels of support may be needed at different stages of RA. As the disease progresses, your involvement will change. Here are some suggestions that may help both you and the one you're caring for.



Stay informed

Learn as much as you can about RA and its complications to help predict what might come next, as best as possible.

You'll also be able to educate others who may not understand how this disease can impact your life. **Have your own support system**



Caring for someone with RA requires a great deal of patience and understanding. While you're supporting them, it's only fair to rely on others to support you.

Express your feelings to friends and family, or seek out an RA support group to meet others who can relate.



Take time for yourself

We know there's plenty on your plate, but don't forget that your well-being is important too. If you're not taking care of yourself, how can you care for someone else?

Don't hesitate to ask friends or family to pitch in a little more every now and then so you can have some "you time."



Don't forget about fun

Watch a funny movie together. Laugh together.

Do something to lighten the load, and remember that you are both more than RA.

While caring for your loved one, remember to keep caring for yourself.

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