7 Strategies for Facing RA Morning Stiffness

by MARIAH LEACH

Managing Rheumatoid Arthritis Morning Stiffness

Perhaps one of the most common and prominent symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is morning stiffness. In fact, rheumatologists consider morning stiffness that lasts at least an hour as one of the key signs of an RA diagnosis.

While I have personally experienced extra stiffness in the mornings as a result of my RA, I have to admit I tend to think of morning stiffness in the same way I think about the “morning sickness” that may come with pregnancy. It isn’t the same level of intensity for everyone who has RA and it doesn’t necessarily only happen in the morning.

Still, that being said, a lot of us living with RA *do* experience extra stiffness first thing in the morning.

What Causes Rheumatoid Arthritis Morning Stiffness?

It’s caused by prolonged joint inactivity, which obviously can’t be avoided while you’re sleeping. Your body’s natural circadian rhythms can also cause a nighttime surge of inflammatory cells that may trigger early morning joint inflammation.

Unfortunately, waking up stiff in the morning is more than just a little inconvenient. Morning stiffness can be an important factor in persistent fatigue. And the effects of morning stiffness can also last throughout the day, affecting your quality of life and psychological well-being.

The good news is that there are some tried and true strategies to make it easier to face the day with rheumatoid arthritis morning stiffness!

1. Do More the Night Before

Although I often feel fatigued at the end of a long day, I’m more physically capable at 6 p.m. than I am at 6 a.m.

So, I try to take a little time every evening to make things easier for myself the next morning. I make lunches for my kids and place essential items for the next day by the door, so nothing gets forgotten if I’m not feeling great the next day.

Other prep ideas could include setting the coffee maker, preparing some healthy breakfast items in advance, or laying out your outfit for the following day. That way if you have a bad night or you’re extra stiff in the morning, there isn’t a lot that needs to be done before you can get to your regularly scheduled activities.

2. Give Yourself Extra Time

If you struggle to get moving in the morning, you may want to consider setting your alarm clock a bit earlier than

the time you need to get out of bed.

Pay attention to how long it takes for you to loosen up and get moving in the mornings comfortably – for many of us this is about 30 to 45 minutes – and then set your alarm to give yourself that extra time.

Of course, waking up earlier results in less sleep, even if you don't get out of bed right away. So it's also important to consider adjusting what time you are going to bed at night so you can be sure to get adequate rest.

Personally, I've found that it works out pretty well to have my husband wake me up when he gets into the shower. His time in the shower gives me a few extra minutes in bed, and by the time he's done I'm usually able to get moving.

3. Take Time to Stretch

I use my extra time in bed in the mornings for some gentle, range-of-motion stretching to help get my body moving. First, I slowly move my ankles, knees, hips, wrists, fingers, toes, and any other joints that might be bothering me. I like to move these joints one at a time while still under my nice warm covers!

Just five to ten minutes of stretching can help increase blood flow in your body and lubricate your joints. I find that even a few minutes of stretching helps to minimize the pain I ultimately experience once I do manage to get out of bed.

Next page: Four more morning stiffness tips, plus some thoughts on combatting stiffness throughout the day.

Tips for Combating Rheumatoid Arthritis Morning Stiffness

4. Utilize the Power of Heat

Heat can be an important tool in fighting RA morning stiffness, whether used on a regular basis or just on particularly difficult mornings.

For example, you could adjust your thermostat to kick the heat up about half hour before you get out of bed, include a heating pad in your bed stretching routine, or move straight from your bed into a nice, hot shower. Heat is a great way to boost the blood flow into your joints, which will help relieve stiffness.

5. Morning Medications

If you take a morning dose of medication, make sure you incorporate this step into your morning routine.

It might even make sense to keep your medication and some water on your nightstand, so you can maximize the impact of the medication by taking it before you even get out of bed.

Depending on the medication, you may also want to consider keeping a small snack on your bedside table so there will be something in your stomach while you take time to get moving before breakfast.

6. Enlist Help

Another way to minimize the difficulty of dealing with morning stiffness is to enlist help from your family.

For example, my husband brings me a hot cup of tea in the morning to help me get moving. He takes care of getting breakfast for our kids too, which makes it a lot easier for me to get moving and manage lunches and dinner later in the day.

So see if anyone in your family can help you adjust your routine or trade tasks to make the mornings easier to

handle.

7. Try to Stay Positive

Lastly, I always try to face the day with a positive attitude – no matter how I may be feeling when I wake up.

Most days I know I have to get out of bed and get moving no matter how I feel, so I personally find this a lot easier to do if I can try to keep myself in a good mood.

The morning stiffness may still be there, but I don't have to let it ruin my entire day!

Now that you've learned all the different strategies for combatting rheumatoid arthritis morning stiffness from Mariah, Anna offers her tips on how to manage RA stiffness throughout the day.

Combatting Stiffness Throughout the Day

Many people with RA have joint pain and stiffness throughout their day, which can make work or school so much less tolerable. There are a few ways you can make it a bit easier on yourself.

Firstly, don't be afraid to take hot packs, heating pads or over the counter patches that deliver heat. These can be placed on your affected joints during the day to help keep them mobile and pain-free.

If you have a job where you are expected to type a lot, it is important to take regular breaks and stretch your fingers to keep them from getting tight.

Additionally, if you work at the computer, it can be really easy to develop back and neck problems and stiffness and pain related to poor posture.

Make sure your workstation is ergonomically correct.

If you're using a laptop, consider getting a desk (or you can use a bed tray) to put your computer on so that you're not bending down to see what is on the screen. You might also want to try using a separate keyboard that can be placed lower than the monitor so you can still sit and type comfortably.

If you have trouble with a stiff back and neck during the day, you can also apply heat to it to keep it from getting too stiff. If you are sitting down for the bulk of the day, it is also important to stand up and stretch your body to keep it from getting too "used" to being in one position.