7 Tips for Exercising with Rheumatoid Arthritis

by ANNA SCANLON

Exercising With Rheumatoid Arthritis

Exercising with rheumatoid arthritis can be extremely difficult, especially when you factor in the excess fatigue and joint pain. However, exercise is a great way to fight weight gain and RA and is important in order to keep your bones, joints, muscles, and body healthy. In fact, it is especially important to exercise with RA, as repeated use of steroids can thin out your bones, and exercise can help combat that.

Additionally, building muscle around your afflicted joints can help support them and keep them stronger, allowing you more freedom of motion. It is also suggested that regular exercise can reduce the pain of RA in general, making it a great regular activity.

Although it may not be easy, I have a few exercising with rheumatoid arthritis tips you can use to get your body in motion.

1. Listen to Your Body

Regular exercise is extremely important, but it is also important that you're listening to your body. If you're having a particularly painful flare or your fatigue is bad, give exercise a rest for the day.

It is important to exercise on the days you feel good to make sure you have more of those feel-good days in the future. Exercising when you're in extreme pain or are fatigued makes it even worse for you and your body.

You can still exercise with a flare, if you choose to do so, but remember to continue to listen to your body as you do so. If you do decide to exercise whilst in a flare, you may want to do exercises in short bursts and take frequent breaks, rather than trying to fit in a grueling 30 minutes to an hour of exercise

When exercising with rheumatoid arthritis, there is sometimes a bit of discomfort as often times you are stretching your body beyond its normal capabilities. However, this doesn't mean that you should be in pain. There is a difference between being sore or "feeling the burn" and something being painful. If you experience pain at any point during your exercises, stop immediately and assess the pain.

2. Stretch

Stretch before and after you do exercise. Most people who do especially high impact exercise (runners, etc.) employ this method, but even if you're doing something low-impact, it is important to get your ligaments, tendons, and joints prepared.

If you have any joints that are particularly stiff, you may want to take some extra time on them. Don't overstretch your limbs, but get them warmed up and ready for movement. You can also stretch after exercise to ensure ease of movement when you are finished.

3. Take It Easy On Your Joints

Aerobic exercise is extremely important for everyone, with or without RA, but this doesn't mean you need to choose something that is particularly difficult on your joints.

If you like to run and are able to, then by all means, do so. But for many people (myself included), running is out of the question because of the way my knees pound on the pavement when I do it.

Instead of picking something that might hurt, try an aerobic activity that is easier on your joints. For example, swimming is a great way to get in a good work out while still cushioning and supporting your joints. Using the elliptical machine is also a good way to get your heart rate up without placing too much pressure on your knees and ankles. Likewise, riding a bike, either stationary or one that will actually take you somewhere is also a good way to get in some good exercise without adding any additional pain.

4. Strength Training

Strength training is another good way to keep your muscles and ligaments in shape. Most gyms have strength-training machines that allow you to target specific muscle groups and get them a little bit stronger.

This is important for the overall health of your joints, however it is also important that you don't overextend yourself when strength training. Before you begin a strength regime, it is a good idea to speak with your doctor and/or a physical therapist or personal trainer who is aware of your needs and can advise you on the best exercises and stretches to do.

5. Weight Bearing Exercise

While swimming and the elliptical combined with strength training are great for those with RA, it is also important to add some weight-bearing exercises into the mix to stave off osteoporosis or to keep your arthritis from getting worse.

Try taking your kids or your dog on a walk once a day somewhere nearby, or if you're able to, walk to and from your gym. If you're able to take up running or jogging, do so, but don't strain your joints too much. Likewise, if you can take a dance class or a fitness class without hurting your joints, those are other great ways to increase your weight bearing fitness exercises.

6. Classes to Consider

There are a few classes you can consider taking with RA that may improve your overall health. Gentle exercise, such as tai-chi or yoga may help you keep up and/or improve your flexibility and range of motion.

If you're feeling a bit more adventurous, Pilates can help strengthen all areas of your body. Ballet classes specifically those targeted toward beginners or with an emphasis on the barre portion are also something to consider.

7. Aftercare

Once you finish exercising with rheumatoid arthritis, make a point to soak your sore muscles in some warm water to help keep them flexible. If your gym has a Jacuzzi, this is a perfect excuse to get in it and use it as much as possible. If not, make it part of your routine to come home after the gym and soak in a hot bath or take a nice, long, warm shower. Your muscles and joints will thank you for it.

Remember, before you begin an exercise program, you should always consult with your doctor. He or she will give you the best advice on what exercises should be employed in your daily life and what you need to work on as far as improving your fitness.