How to Fight Rheumatoid Arthritis Weight Gain

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Why Is Rheumatoid Arthritis Weight Gain Common?

While unexplained weight loss can be one of the earliest — and sneakiest — signs of RA, weight gain after an RA diagnosis is unfortunately quite common, and difficult to bear. Even if you've maintained a healthy weight all your life, you could see the number on the scale rise when symptoms and medications begin to interfere.

Whenever you want to make a change in your health or lifestyle, it's important to understand what's causing the problem in the first place. Getting to know the factors and processes behind your rheumatoid arthritis weight gain or loss issues can help you attack the problem at the source and change your trajectory for a healthier body mass and a happier self-image.

What Causes Unintended Weight Gain in Rheumatoid Arthritis?

While the disease itself doesn't cause you to pack on pounds, RA disrupts your body and routine in a number of ways that could result in weight gain. It's difficult to predict how each patient will adapt and react to their RA, but there are some clear factors that will increase your chances of struggling with unwanted rheumatoid arthritis weight gain:

Medication

Not all medications will interfere with your metabolism, but the corticosteroid prednisone has a particularly bad reputation when it comes to weight gain. It also happens to be one of the most commonly prescribed drugs for the chronic inflammation of RA.

Unfortunately, the majority of patients who take prednisone will experience some degree of weight gain — and sometimes in places you don't expect. Fat can accumulate in the face, abdomen and even the back of the neck. Fortunately, most people will quickly shed the excess weight once the steroid dosage is lowered.

Exercise Problems

It's no secret that exercise is one of the very best things you can do for your muscles, joints, and waistline, but it can get complicated when RA flares up. You may realize that an exercise class or long walk is best for your body in the long run, but simply getting off the couch and out of the front door can be too much to ask some days.

If you have trouble with weight bearing movements, fatigue or range of motion, build up an arsenal of readily-available activities that favor certain movements over others. For instance, you can do laps in the local pool or join a yoga class when you're up for the journey, but having an elliptical machine, treadmill or selection of gentle exercise videos on hand will let you get your muscles moving at home (or the office) when you can't commit to travel.

Diet Issues

Once you factor in unwelcome medication side effects and a less active lifestyle, you'll find that your regular diet may no longer be suitable.

After all, if you're not burning those extra calories, they will get stored as body fat. And if you're not taking in quality calories, you'll see and feel the unhappy consequences. As your body's needs and metabolism change, your diet needs to change, too.

Obviously, a wholesome diet is the way to go, but it can be difficult to jump into an entirely new menu plan when you're used to eating whatever you want. The first step is to learn which foods are "calorie dense" versus those that are "nutrient dense" and begin to make smart substitutions.

How to Lose Weight With Rheumatoid Arthritis

Losing weight can feel like an uphill battle when you live with RA. You're sore, tired and struggling to simply get through your day. In turn, many people with RA fall into a *reactive* cycle rather than a *proactive* routine.

It's time to break that cycle. You may not be able to control all the factors, but when it comes to the basic grounds of weight gain — taking more calories in than you're burning — there are some ways to tip the balance in your favor.

Next page: Strategies for losing weight with rheumatoid arthritis.

How to Lose Weight With Rheumatoid Arthritis

Below are six ways to help you lose weight and achieve your weight loss goal.

Don't Drink Your Calories

Most people vastly underestimate the amount of sugar, carbohydrates, and calories that come in liquid form, which can be a major pitfall when you're trying to lose weight. Your first step is to cut out the soda and juice, and switching to diet versions may not be a better solution. Although more research is needed, anecdotal evidence suggests that artificial sweeteners can negatively affect your symptoms, appetite and weight goals.

Water is clearly the best beverage option, but you can add some interest with some fresh fruit (think citrus, berries or herbs like ginger), or opt for herbal tea instead. Keep most of the flavor on your plate, and use your beverages to quench your thirst and refresh your body.

Eat Your Veggies First

When you're faced with a feast, it's natural to jump into the richest, most flavorful delicacy on your plate. However, beginning with the meaty, starchy, creamy or saucy part will almost certainly add up to more calories at the end of the meal than if you had started with the vegetables.

If you're not a huge fan of veggies, don't fret: there are plenty of creative ways to pair and prepare them for more satisfying taste and texture. There's also a huge array of available vegetables, and it pays to try a new one every now and then. Your new favorite flavor could be hiding in the produce stand!

Calm Your Appetite

Restaurant appetizers are traditionally served to whet your appetite, a way to get you salivating for the main course. Try to look at them from a different perspective — as a way to diminish your appetite a bit so you can make healthy choices and avoid over-indulgence.

Instead of reaching for the bread basket, ask for a cup of (veggie) soup or a green salad right off the bat, which will fill your stomach without adding too many calories. If you don’t expect to be enjoying a multi-course meal at the restaurant, eat something small and healthy before you leave the house. That will help you curb temptation when you see the menu.

Trick Your Eyes

Since portion control is so important (and equally challenging), it’s worth investing some effort and money into that aspect of your diet. The way your food looks makes a big difference, so make it look like you’re giving yourself a bigger helping than you really are.

Some clever accessories can help you enjoy your meal without feeling like you’re missing out or eating less. Smaller plates are a good place to start: ditch the wide-rimmed dinner plates for a sizable side plate, since empty space will emphasize the fact that food is "missing". Studies have also shown that the color blue can be an appetite deterrent, so according to the theory, blue side plates may be your keys to portion control success.

Take Up Yoga

Whatever end of the scale you’re at, yoga is a wonderful addition to your healthy routine. It’s both aerobic and strengthening, plus it’s a gentle way to maintain and improve your range of motion. Best of all, yoga is incredibly variable and customizable, so you won’t have to stress your joints or any given muscle group to get through your practice.

Yoga is generally slow-paced and gentle, but it comes in all sorts of forms, and it’s important to start at the lowest level. The postures and movements can be more taxing than they seem, so don’t get overly ambitious at the beginning – talk with a yoga instructor to find the routine that’s right for you.

Monitor Your Emotions

It’s amazing how your psychological states can influence your physical habits, and the burden of RA symptoms can drag you down quickly. If you’re feeling isolated, anxious, weary or depressed — all possible consequences of living with a chronic illness — other aspects of your life and health will inevitably suffer.

Emotional eating is a big problem for some people, and a major roadblock to weight loss. Likewise, forgetting to eat or losing your appetite in stressful times can sap your strength and lead to muscle loss and other problems that come with being underweight. Keeping a food journal can help you track your eating patterns, which will show you when and where you need to be more vigilant about what you’re eating (or not eating).

What's Next for Dealing With Rheumatoid Arthritis Weight Gain?

Starting with the above weight loss tips may help you at the beginning of your weight loss journey. If you're looking for ways to help achieve your weight loss goals, there are plenty of resources online that focus on arthritis diet weight loss advice and exercises that won't aggravate your symptoms, or you can speak with your doctor about finding nutritional or weight loss assistance.