How to Cope With Rheumatoid Arthritis and Cold Weather

by ANNA SCANLON

Rheumatoid Arthritis and Cold Weather Management Tips

With the weather becoming cooler or colder, many people with rheumatoid arthritis (RA) may find that their joints feel a lot stiffer or it feels a bit more challenging to get going in the morning. While the National Institutes of Health (NIH) say there is no direct correlation between cold weather and an arthritis flare, many people feel worse for the wear in the wintertime.

The NIH theorizes that this is due to the changing of the weather and pressure on the joints that causes. Whatever the case, it is important to stay as healthy as possible to prevent RA flares during the winter. Below are a few ways to prevent rheumatoid arthritis and cold weather complications, from preventing colds and cases of flu to finding ways to keeping your joints and muscles from stiffening.

How to Prevent Getting Sick With RA

When you have RA, you may find yourself more susceptible to illnesses, which can make your RA worse. During the fall and winter, viruses go around a lot quicker due to the shifts in temperature and more time people spent indoors and close to one another, so it is important to take the necessary precautions for fighting off the cold or flu.

This includes remembering to wash your hands any time you come in contact with something communal (carrying around antibacterial soap or sanitizer isn't a bad idea), staying hydrated, and covering your mouth when you sneeze or cough.

If you work with vulnerable populations, such as elderly people or young people under the age of five, ensure you are extra vigilant with your health practices. These populations are both more likely to carry a cold or the flu, and you are more likely to pass it on to them.

You should also speak to your doctor about getting the flu shot to ensure you don't get the dreaded disease. The flu can knock you off your feet for quite a long time and make your RA a lot worse than it needs to be, so prevention is a great way to make sure you don't fall victim to it.

Tips for Combatting RA Stiffness

Many people with RA have stiffness in the mornings, but as stated above, it can be even worse during the cold fall and winter months. There are a few ways you can work with your body to try and relieve this and get you going in the mornings.

If you find you are stiffer during the colder months, reset your schedule, so you go to bed an hour earlier, but wake up an hour earlier. This will give you a bit more time in the mornings to get ready and start to feel more like yourself.

For some people, taking a bath makes them feel sleepy, but a warm bath is a great way to help your muscles and stiff joints limber up before you start the day. If a bath doesn't make you want to crawl back to your bed, it might be something to incorporate into your morning routine.

However, if a bath in the morning just isn't going to work for you, try taking a long hot shower, stretching your joints and muscles as you bathe. This will help ease some of the soreness and limber up your muscles.

Another way to ensure your muscles and joints aren't as stiff in the mornings is to apply heating pads or a hot water bottle to the affected areas as you get up and stretch. This can help you limber up and be ready for the day.

You should also consider doing some light stretches in the mornings as this will help get your joints and muscles in a position to get moving for the day.

Not stretching will make your joints feel even stiffer and unusable, making the day a lot more difficult to face. Stretching your legs, doing some leg lifts and rotating your arms in a circular motion are all great ways to get your body going.

Find Ways to Stay Warm

If you find cold weather makes you feel worse, it is important you wrap up and stay warm in the winter. If you find yourself cold at night, wrap up with an extra blanket or two or slip a hot water bottle between your sheets. Or if you live somewhere cold, always wear a scarf as this can make you feel much warmer than you realize.

If you have Raynaud's, you may find that your hands and feet are more sensitive to the cold. Glove liners work well when you're indoors, but when you go outside, you can purchase hand and foot warmers to insert into your gloves and shoes. This will keep you nice and toasty and combat the pain of Raynaud's!

Do Light Exercise to Help With Stiffness

Weight-bearing exercise is particularly important for people with RA, and much more so in the fall and winter as it keeps your joints and muscles moving. Exercise is also an important aspect to keep you from developing osteoarthritis, but even more so, it can help prevent the dreaded morning stiffness.

Of course, this doesn't mean you need to become a triathlete overnight, but it does mean you should start incorporating an exercise routine into your schedule. If you're out of shape, try making small goals at first like walking the dog around the block every day or taking a short walk down the road for some fresh air.

You can also start off with some swimming (doing so in a heated pool does wonders for your RA anyway!), or taking a gentle yoga class. A full-on workout routine isn't necessary, as long as you're getting in some cardio every day and making sure you're doing weight-bearing exercises.

However, it is important to note that exercising during a flare is not helpful. You should always get your doctor's go-ahead before you start a new exercise routine.

But, exercising when you're not in a flare can help prevent flares in the future, so it isn't a great idea to go too long without establishing one. If you find that exercise is painful, take a pain pill 30 minutes to an hour before you start your exercise routine. This should help cut down on pain significantly.