10 Tips to Tackle Rheumatoid Arthritis Joint Pain

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10 Practical Tips For Managing RA Joint Pain

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) can impact your life in some ways, but one symptom that nearly everyone living with RA experiences is joint pain. Managing RA joint pain can take some work, and unfortunately, the same approach may not be effective every time. That's why it can be helpful to have a number of joint pain management strategies to try to get your RA pain under control.

1. Talk to Your Doctor

When it comes to managing RA joint pain, the best place to start is with your rheumatologist to make sure you have an overall RA treatment plan in place. You and your doctor will decide which treatment options are best for you. This often involves the use of disease-modifying anti-rheumatic drugs (DMARDs) or sometimes biologics, which work to prevent joint damage and slow the overall progression of RA.

Your doctor may also prescribe steroids (either orally or by injection into a particularly problematic joint) or recommend over-the-counter nonsteroidal anti-inflammatories (NSAIDs), like ibuprofen (Advil) or acetaminophen (Tylenol) to help deal with joint pain and inflammation. Stronger pain relievers, such as opioids, may sometimes be used for severe pain.

You should also discuss additional pain management strategies with your doctor, to determine which ones are most appropriate for you.

2. Get Some Exercise

Though it may seem a bit counterintuitive when dealing with joint pain, gentle exercise can help reduce muscle and joint pain. Good options include gentle stretching, walking, swimming, water aerobics, cycling, yoga, or tai chi.

Staying physically active helps maintain and improve joint function and range of motion, as well as giving you more energy and improving your overall mood. However, it's important to make sure you don't overdo it. Your doctor or a physical therapist can help you figure out an exercise routine that is right for you.

3. Use Assistive Devices as Needed

There are a wide variety of assistive devices that can help you stabilize and rest joints that are painful and inflamed, making everyday tasks less painful.

Examples include:

- Kitchen tools with large ergonomic handles

- Grab bars in bathrooms or on stairs
- Splints or braces to keep joints in proper alignment, or padded insoles for your shoes

A physical or occupational therapist can help you identify which assistive devices would be most useful based on which of your joints are causing the most pain.

4. Visit a Massage Therapist

When joints get painful and inflamed, it's not unusual for muscle pain to follow – creating a negative feedback cycle that only leads to more pain. Visiting a massage therapist can be a great way to provide your joints and muscles with some much-needed relief. Massage can also help ease anxiety and improve sleep, which, in turn, will also help reduce pain.

5. Utilize Heat and Cold

Depending on the type of joint pain you are experiencing, heat or cold may help. It may take some experimentation to determine whether heat or cold is a better fit for your pain – or alternate between hot and cold may be successful.

Cold can help numb pain and reduce inflammation. You can apply cold therapy with a gel ice pad, a bag of ice, or even a package of frozen vegetables.

Heat can help relax tense muscles and relieve pain and stiffness by increasing blood flow to the painful area. Options for heat include heating pads (electric or microwavable), warm compresses, heat patches, a warm bath or shower, heated pool or hot tub, or even hot wax.

6. Try Topical Treatments

Topical treatments are creams, gels, and lotions that can be rubbed directly on to your skin to help provide temporary relief of particularly painful joints as the treatment is absorbed through your skin. Topical treatments can also come in the form of sprays or patches.

There are both prescription and over-the-counter options, so talk to your doctor to determine which might work best for you.

7. Consider Acupuncture or Acupressure

Acupuncture is a form of traditional Chinese medicine that has been around for centuries. During the process, fine needles are gently placed near nerve endings, which are thought to stimulate the body's natural painkillers. If you aren't a fan of needles, you could consider acupressure, which involves applying pressure instead of needles.

8. Test Out Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulation (TENS)

TENS is a form of therapy that uses low-voltage currents to stimulate nerves and interfere with pain pathways. A TENS unit is a small machine that uses electrodes to attach to the skin and then sends an electrical current to painful spots. The electrical current stimulates the nervous system, possibly encouraging your brain to release endorphins to help relieve pain.

9. Train Your Mind With Relaxation Techniques

Relaxation techniques can help take your mind off the joint pain you are experiencing and reduce your level of stress and anxiety, which can help relieve pain indirectly.

Options include:

- Deep breathing
- Guided imagery
- Visualization
- Meditation

These techniques are most effective if you practice them on a regular basis.

10. Seek Support

In addition to talking to your doctor, physical therapist, and/or occupational therapist, having a network of friends, family members, or co-workers who can help provide emotional support can also be extremely useful when it comes to managing pain.

You may also consider seeing a pain management specialist, therapist or counselor to help you cope. Patient support groups (and websites like this one!) are also great resources for figuring out how to manage pain and maintain optimism.