9 Tips for Traveling With RA

by ANNA SCANLON

How to Prepare for Traveling With RA

Traveling with rheumatoid arthritis (RA) can be uncomfortable, especially if you are experiencing a flare or joint stiffness. But as someone with a long resume full of travel with lupus (lupus and RA are similar conditions that produce joint stiffness and arthritis), I have a few travel secrets for you to ensure your journey is more comfortable.

Get Enough Sleep the Night Before

This can be extremely difficult as many people find travel nerve-wracking. In addition, your head may be in a million different places ensuring you have everything — and sometimes there is a huge sense of excitement that makes sleeping virtually impossible.

However, not getting enough sleep can be a major contributor to arthritis pain and joint stiffness. I know when I don't get enough sleep my joints hurt quite badly, so it is important to get as much shut eye as you can before you leave so you'll be comfortable as you can be during your journey.

Try to avoid not getting enough rest and figuring you will sleep on the way to your destination. Sometimes, this is not possible for many different reasons.

If you can fall asleep, it's a bonus. But if you can't and you've had enough sleep, you won't be in unnecessary pain or more pain than usual.

Keep Your Medicine Somewhere You Can Get to Easily

Traveling on long haul journeys, especially through multiple time zones, can mean your medication schedule gets a little messed up. However, you should avoid using this as an excuse to skip doses.

Instead, pack it somewhere you can get to easily, such as a purse or carry on bag that will go under the seat in front of you. Take your medicine as close to the time you usually take it as possible.

You should also have pain medication in the same place in case you start to experience joint pain or feel unwell.

Stretch

Stretching out is usually not easy on a plane, but sitting in one spot for so long can contribute to joint stiffness and contribute to the risk of a blood clot.

During a long flight, make sure you get up and walk the aisles at least a couple of times, stretching your limbs to ensure they're loose and to counteract any stiffness from sitting too long.

If you're on a train, it should be very easy to wander from car to car every so often. If you're taking a long road trip, make sure to stop every few hours even if you don't have to go to the bathroom. This will help you stretch your joints and muscles and avoid cramping and stiffness.

Wear Loose-Fitting Clothing

Nothing is worse than feeling restricted while sitting for a long period of time. This can especially be painful on the knee joints and hip joints, so instead of opting for jeans, wear loose-fitting pants or a longer skirt instead. This will give you a little more room to spread out, even if you don't have a lot of space.

Bring Some of the Comforts of Home

If you're traveling in a car or on a train, bring a pillow to either sit on or to lean against the window. This can help you fall asleep if you need it and help you get a little bit more comfortable and avoid extra pain.

When I fly on planes I typically don't take a pillow, but often pack a pair of warm socks, as my feet get cold due to Raynaud's syndrome associated with my autoimmune disorder. This keeps me comfortable throughout the flight.

If you have trouble sleeping in the light, bring an eyeshade to help you get your rest.

Avoid the Sun as Much as Possible

You may not always have a choice where you sit on a train or in the car, but it is always best to try and avoid the sun. Some people with RA may be extremely sensitive to the sun, while others are on medication that can cause quick sunburns or rashes.

Prepare by packing or purchasing a shade to go over the window to protect your skin. Even if it isn't a particularly hot or sunny day, you should always put some sunscreen on if you're traveling a long distance in the sun, as you often don't realize how much sun exposure you're getting.

Stay Hydrated

Sitting in the sun on a train or in the car can be extremely dehydrating, causing headaches or for you to feel ill over time. The air on planes is also often very drying, which can in turn make you very thirsty.

Make sure to keep water or a drink with you during your travels. If you're traveling on an airplane, purchase a bottle of water before you board so you can have it with you immediately.

Some airlines will also offer a water fountain on board so you can refill your bottle if needed.

Use a Wheelie Suitcase and Don't Over-Pack It

To avoid strain, don't try and manage with a heavy duffle bag. Instead, use a wheelie suitcase that you can easily maneuver around the airport, train station or your final destination.

A suitcase with two wheels is good, but one with four wheels is even better as you can simply wheel it along side of you. However, if you are going to have to lift your case, don't over-pack it so you are struggling with it, as this can aggravate your RA.

Instead, only pack what you can comfortably lift. On the same token, don't bring a heavy carry-on that you will struggle to put into the overhead compartment — make sure it is either very light and you can lift it without a struggle, or you can slide it under the seat in front of you.

Avoid Multiple Stopovers or Make Sure You Have Enough Time Between Them

When traveling by plane or train, you are often given the choice of stopovers. Sometimes this can make the trip a lot cheaper.

If you possibly can, avoid stopovers, as this can mean rushing through an airport or train station, sometimes with heavy bags in tow. As you know, this can exacerbate your RA quite badly.

If a stopover is the difference between being able to afford the trip and not being able to, then make sure you have more than enough time to change trains or planes in order to minimize stress and potentially harming yourself or bringing on a flare.