Tips on How to Make the Most out of Thanksgiving With Rheumatoid Arthritis

by LANA BARHUM

Learning to Enjoy Thanksgiving With Rheumatoid Arthritis

The holidays are a tough time for everyone. But this is especially true for those of us with rheumatoid arthritis (RA) and other chronic diseases.

Thanksgiving is my favorite holiday, and while, I enjoy the celebrating, cooking, and preparing, my body doesn't agree. Thanksgiving with RA also means flares, fatigue, and stress – lots of stress.

How Thanksgiving Makes RA Worse

The Thanksgiving holiday can feel like a no-win situation for those of us with RA. While the holiday isn't supposed to make RA worse, it seems to be the case.

Participating means there will be payback later. On the other hand, if we don't participate, we end up feeling alone and having loved ones not understand why we are not joining in on holiday celebrations.

There are a few different reasons why RA symptoms worsen during around Thanksgiving.

First, there is the temptation to put aside healthy habits. You end up making too many unhealthy food choices, not being active, overdoing things, staying up too late and stressing about Thanksgiving plans and family drama.

The holiday can also bring about depressed feelings, especially because it means visiting family, or not being able to visit, or anticipating family drama. The holiday blues coincide with the holiday season, as the shorter days and colder weather also play a role.

RA flares are more common this time of the year, and it is one of many concerns those of us with RA have, as we get closer to Thanksgiving and try to get through the New Year. Characterized by pain and stiffness, these episodes can make it hard to enjoy Thanksgiving, follow through on plans, and spend time with loved ones.

The reasons this holiday can cause flares are:

- **Changing cooler, damper weather.** Although research disagrees on this one, most of us with RA know that colder weather increases our joint pain.
- **Holiday travel.** Stress and tension from travel can cause physical discomfort and worsen joint symptoms, especially because travel involves a lot of sitting and not enough movement.
- **Stress is an often-unwelcome guest** this time of the year for everyone, not just people with RA.
- **Infection and illnesses.** RA patients who take immunity-suppressing medications are at higher risks for illnesses and infections.
- **Certain foods.** Some celebratory foods aggravate RA symptoms, including junk foods, sugars, and fried

food.

- **Fatigue and exhaustion.** RA can cause debilitating fatigue anytime, but it is worse around Thanksgiving because people tend to overdo things and don't get enough rest.

Enjoying Thanksgiving With Rheumatoid Arthritis and Avoiding Flares

How do you enjoy thanksgiving with rheumatoid arthritis and not to worry about flares, depression and the stress this holiday brings?

The answer isn't simple. But I have found a few things that help as I try to enjoy the holiday despite my concerns about flare-ups.

Avoid Food Triggers

Probably the best part of the holiday is the food – the turkey, stuffing, casseroles, side dishes, and various pies. But it can also be the worst part, as there are plenty of foods that can aggravate your RA symptoms and worsen inflammation levels.

If you know your food triggers, keep them in mind as you celebrate. But rather than focusing on what you cannot eat, focus on what you can and enjoy those foods.

Budget Your Energy

If you love going to holiday parties and celebrating with family and friends, it can be hard to do with your already busy life. Save your energy for the things you want to do, but prioritize what it is you need to do first.

It is very important to listen to your body. No matter how much you plan and prepare for the holiday, your body just cannot handle it all.

If your body tells you, it is time to go home early or cancel your plans, make sure you listen to it.

Plan and Ask for Help

As much as you possibly can, plan ahead of time. You can't do all the cooking, decorating, and hosting all in one day. And if you try to do it all by yourself, you likely will end up bedridden.

Start by speaking up and letting family and friends know what they can expect upfront, for example, if you cannot handle long travel or if you cannot cook a big meal.

If you know an activity could result in a flare, you should ask for help. Asking for help is hard, but you will end up learning the hard way if you don't.

Manage Stress

Family gatherings and holiday travel can quickly increase your stress levels and put you at risk for flare-ups. Effective stress management can help ward up stress that could easily increase your pain and other symptoms.

If Thanksgiving tends to be stressful for you, have a plan for dealing with challenging situations. For example, leaving an event early due to feeling exhausted. Try to keep your mood positive by focusing on what is important and making the best of the holiday, rather than taking on everything and letting it overwhelm you.

Take Your Medications

With all the rush and demand that Thanksgiving brings, it can be tempting to skip taking your medications. Not taking your medications will only cause problems that will make it difficult to enjoy the holiday and probably keep

you in bed for days.

Manage Your Expectations

There is a lot of pressure during Thanksgiving to create perfect memories, have perfect decorations, and make the perfect family dinner. But perfection – with or without RA – isn't realistic.

Trying to make everything perfect means ignoring your own needs. Therefore, it is more important to enjoy time with your family and friends rather than to set yourself up for failure.

Skip the Family Drama

Thanksgiving brings families together along with family drama. If possible, try not to get sucked into it because you don't need the stress.

If the thought of spending time with family gives you anxiety, you're allowed to stay home, and not worry about what anyone else thinks. After all, you must prioritize your health.

Listen to your heart and spend Thanksgiving doing what is more comfortable and better for your health.

Flares Might Still Happen

Sometimes, no matter how hard you try, flare-ups cannot be avoided. If you start to feel a flare coming on, get some rest and, if needed, call your doctor.

By budgeting your time and energy appropriately, you can still make the most of being thankful and celebrating the holiday.

If you end up experiencing a flare-up this Thanksgiving, take note what triggered your flare. That way you can think about what you can do differently in the future to avoid a holiday flare.

And since the holidays are only just beginning, you will need to place your focus on keeping flares from happening; this way, you can enjoy the rest of the holiday season and successfully manage thanksgiving with rheumatoid arthritis.