8 Tips for Coping with Rheumatoid Arthritis at Work

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Tips for Working With Rheumatoid Arthritis

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) doesn't work around your schedule, and flare-ups show up whether you are home or at work. In fact, flares are known for showing up when you need to be at your best.

Even early on, RA is linked to disability. Research from the Mayo Clinic finds 1 in 5 RA patients isn't working two years after diagnosis, and 1 in 3 will leave the workforce after five years.

If you fortunate enough to keep working, some days are harder than others, but the key to keep at it is to find ways to better cope with RA on the job.

Here are seven tips to help you manage RA on the job.

1. Manage Your Symptoms

RA treatments have come a long way in the past couple decades. Researchers know early, and aggressive therapy with disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs (DMARDs) and biologics can slow RA's progress. This means if you can keep your symptoms under control, you can continue working.

Work with your rheumatologist to find the best treatment plan for your situation and keep your doctor apprised if symptoms aren't resolving. You should also maintain a healthy lifestyle, which includes a healthy diet, activity, and complementary therapies, such as acupuncture and massage.

Make sure you take all the medications prescribed by your doctor. Try to find a balance between side effects, such as drowsiness and trying to maximize pain relief so that you can focus on your life and job duties.

2. Be Realistic

No one knows your limitations and your health better than you do. Don't push yourself and say no when you need to, especially when you know you will end up with an RA flare-up.

You should also be honest with yourself about your situation. There are some jobs you may not be able to do anymore, but that doesn't mean all jobs are off limits or that your opportunities are limited; it just means you need to rethink career goals and whether they are reasonable with RA.

3. Make Your Workspace Ergonomic

Ergonomic tools can make your workspace more comfortable and help you come productive.

Tools, such as special office chairs, footrests, document holders, keyboards and keyboard trays and phone

headsets are helpful, and many employers will provide them to you, especially if they understand the benefits of these tools.

Even your employer won't supply you with these tools, and you may be able to purchase an ergonomic chair and ergonomic computer keyboard. You can also design your workplace to allow you to sit with good posture and so that you are not twisting and turning too much.

But you are entitled to reasonable accommodations under the Americans with Disabilities Act. Employers who have 15 or more employers are legally obligated to provide accommodations to workers who need them.

Reasonable accommodations must not cause a hardship to the employer. These modifications make it easier to do your job and include things like an ergonomic workstation, a flexible schedule, and access to job facility restrooms and parking.

4. Keep a Schedule

Schedules are important for people with RA because our bodies and our immune systems don't do well with too much change.

Start and end your workday at the same time and give yourself a day schedule for specific job duties. On the days where your energy is limited, you may want to work on important tasks first, and then consider working on whatever is left if you are able.

Working overtime may not be an option for you, and if you see your pain and RA symptoms are worsening, you want to see if you can cut your hours, even if it is just for a short time.

5. Take Breaks

You should move around every 20 minutes or so. Sitting or standing for too long in one place can make your pain and fatigue worse and taking even a one-minute break to stand, stretch or walk can keep joints from getting stiff and tired.

You may even consider taking a 10 to 15-minute walk during your lunch break. Or even just sitting outside can reduce your stress and pain levels.

6. Manage Pain and Symptoms as They Occur

It is important to learn to recognize what causes your flares and have items in your workplace to manage pain and symptoms.

If for example, cold worsens your symptoms, keep a sweater nearby, or a heating pad or cold pack if you experience pain and stiffness during your workday. Keep your pain medication on hand.

Keep yourself as prepared as you would at home for flares.

7. Manage Stress

Deadlines and difficult coworkers and bosses are stressful enough. RA pain and symptoms make your job even more stressful.

There are ways to relieve stress and alleviate RA symptoms. These include:

- **Yoga or mindfulness meditation.** Both are excellent ways to stretch, relax and embrace your spiritual side.

- **Tai chi.** Tai chi videos include various exercises and stretches to help you relax and manage RA symptoms.
- **Exercise will relax your mind and body.** It will also strengthen your joints and muscles and offer pain relief.

8. Address Sleep Issues

A good day begins with a full night's sleep and for people with RA, getting enough sleep is important for making it through the day and avoiding flares. But poor sleep quality is a common problem for people with RA.

Sleep problems also worsen pain and fatigue. Addressing sleep issues can help you to manage RA symptoms, improve your quality of life, and make it easier for you to do your job and be successful.

If RA pain and symptoms are keeping you up at night and a sleep schedule isn't helping symptoms and sleep problems, talk to your doctor about revisiting pain medication dosages.

The Takeaway

RA doesn't have to stand in the way of your having a successful career. Managing symptoms, taking care of yourself, being realistic about what you can do, and having a comfortable workspace and support from you are employer are all key to a thriving career.