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Flare up advice for people with inflammatory arthritis

***Information for
patients and carers***

NHS Grampian Physiotherapy

Understanding flares in inflammatory arthritis

The symptoms of inflammatory arthritis tend to come and go, often with no particular pattern.

Sometimes flare ups will have an obvious cause such as another illness, but usually there is no obvious trigger. This unpredictability can make inflammatory arthritis difficult to manage.

Symptoms of a flare up include:

- Pain
- Swelling
- Stiffness
- Fatigue.

These symptoms can vary in intensity and between flares.

Flares can be frustrating and painful but over time, you'll get better at identifying the early signs of a flare which will help you to manage them better.

There are various things that you can do to help with the symptoms of a flare up. These are described in this leaflet.

Useful websites/links

- National Rheumatoid Arthritis Society
www.nras.org.uk
- Versus Arthritis
(the new name for Arthritis Care and Arthritis Research UK).
www.versusarthritis.org
- Psoriasis Association
www.psoriasis-association.org.uk
- The Psoriasis and Psoriatic Arthritis Alliance (PAPAA)
www.papaa.org
- Arthurs Place
www.arthursplace.co.uk
- National Ankylosing Spondylitis Society
www.nass.co.uk

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Coping with a flare up

Rest

When you're having a flare up, it's normal to need to rest. A short afternoon rest with your body completely relaxed may help, or having a lie down when you come in from work for 30 minutes should give you a bit more energy to enjoy the rest of the evening.

However, you may need more rest if your disease is particularly active. If this is the case, you may need to take time off work to recover completely.

It's important to rest your joints in a good position (a position that helps to support your joints and relieves pain). When lying down, use no more than two pillows under your neck. If your shoulders are painful, rest your arms on a pillow at each side. You may find it comfortable to support other joints with pillows while in bed too.

If your back is uncomfortable when sitting down, use a lumbar roll or rolled up towel in the small of your back for added support. Make sure that your hand and forearm are resting on the arm of your chair and don't let your wrist drop forward or drift to the side.

Although rest is very important in managing a flare it's also important to keep your joints moving gently to prevent them becoming too stiff and sore. Remember only to move as far as you feel comfortable. Little and often is best.

Pacing

As well as rest, pacing yourself and only doing what you can is a very important part of coping with a flare. You may find that you have to pace your activities more when you have a flare. It's very important to listen to your body and do this as well as you can.

Aids and splints

You can use aids or splints to support your joints and make daily activities easier. For example, if you have a flare of knee pain/swelling and you have difficulty walking, you can use a walking stick for support. Alternatively, if you are having difficulty with your wrists you can use a wrist support.

If you feel you need any aids/supports, discuss this with your occupational therapist and/or physiotherapist. They can give you more information.

Heat

Heat usually works best on joints that feel stiff and achy. There are several different ways to apply heat to ease your joint pain or stiffness. You could try:

- A warm bath or shower
- An electric blanket
- A hot water bottle wrapped in a towel
- Soaking hands in warm water for 10 to 15 minutes
- Wheat pack for the microwave.

When the flare settles, think about how you coped and what you can learn from it.

- What worked well?
- What could you do differently next time?
- Remember to give yourself credit for coping.
- Think how you'll gradually get back to normal activities and how you'll pace your return to exercise.

When to seek help

In general, these self-management techniques and a few days rest will be enough to manage your flare.

However, if your symptoms are gradually getting worse or you are having regular flares talk to your GP, specialist nurse or consultant about your condition and treatment options.

If you need to contact any member of the multidisciplinary team (consultant, specialist nurse, physiotherapist or occupational therapist) you can email us at:

✉ [**gram.rheumadvice@nhs.scot**](mailto:gram.rheumadvice@nhs.scot)

Flare up plan

Learning how to deal with your flare ups can be very useful. You can develop a flare up plan. When a flare starts don't panic; stop and think about what you can do to manage your symptoms and then make a plan.

Remember: a flare is temporary and there are several things that you can do to help.

| Flare up issue | What can I do to help? |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Increase in pain | Use heat/ice TENS Pain meds Relaxation or distraction Splints |
| Decreased movement, stiffness | Gentle exercises Posture correction Change position/move regularly Pacing techniques |
| Frustration, stress, low mood | Distraction techniques Relaxation Speak to family/friends |

Ice

Generally, ice and cold treatments work best when your joints are particularly hot, swollen and painful.

Important

Never apply cold or ice treatments if you have problems with your circulation. If you're in any doubt, consult your physiotherapist or your doctor.

You can buy cold packs at the chemist or make them at home using ice.

How to make and use a cold pack:

- Run a cloth under cold water then squeeze out the excess water until the cloth is just damp.
- Either place a few crushed ice cubes inside the cloth or wrap the cloth around a small pack of frozen peas.
- Place the cloth side down over the affected joint(s).
- Leave it for 5 to 10 minutes on the area and remove.
Do not leave it on any longer as you may get cold burns.
- You can repeat this up to every 2 hours if required.

Never place the ice pack directly on to your skin.

Contrast bathing

Contrast bathing is another treatment you can do at home for pain and swelling. It's especially useful for hands.

How to use contrast bathing:

- Allow a few ice cubes to melt in a basin or bowl of cold water.
- Also have ready a basin or bowl of hand hot water.
- Soak your hands in the hot water for 3 to 4 minutes, gently moving the joints.
- Then immediately place your hands into the cold water, this time for 20 to 30 seconds (less if it is too uncomfortable for you).
- Repeat this up to 3 times, finishing with your hands in the warm water.

Relaxation and distraction techniques

Using relaxation/breathing techniques has been shown to help control your pain during a flare. Diaphragmatic (deep) breathing reduces pain by:

- Relaxing muscles
- Controlling feelings of panic
- Reducing stress hormones
- Giving you a sense of being in control.

There are several online relaxation techniques available. If you would like more information, discuss this with your occupational therapist or physiotherapist.

Distracting yourself from your pain with an activity that interests you can also be helpful (for example listening to music, watching TV or colouring).

You can also use distraction to help you through tasks (for example if going upstairs causes you difficulty, try naming a different country/colour with each step).

Pain relief

If you're having a flare, it's important to control the pain. You can control pain by using medication appropriately. Please discuss this with your consultant, specialist nurse or GP.

Education and information

Learning about your condition can help you feel more in control if you have a flare. If you feel you need more information about your condition, discuss this with the specialist nurse, occupational therapist or physiotherapist.

There are also some useful websites listed at the end of this booklet.

It's also a good idea to discuss your condition with family, friends and colleagues. This will allow them to understand more and provide you with support during a flare.