

Self-Management for Inflammatory Arthritis

Patient Information

Therapy Services

Author ID: SJH
Leaflet Ref: Tpy 011
Version: 7
Leaflet title: Self-Management for Inflammatory Arthritis
Last review: December 2023
Expiry Date: December 2025



Introduction

Physiotherapy is widely used in the treatment of Inflammatory Arthritis. This is in conjunction with the medical treatment given by your Consultant Rheumatologist. Physiotherapists are part of a team of healthcare professionals who can help you to resume or maintain an active and independent life both at home and work. This leaflet aims to enable you to cope with your arthritis at home with advice and reassurance to help you to feel confident about managing your condition

What is inflammatory arthritis?

This is a group of conditions (including Rheumatoid Arthritis and Psoriatic Arthritis), causing inflammation of the joints. This inflammation can damage your joints, which may cause them to become deformed. Although Inflammatory Arthritis is a persistent condition, there are long periods when it will “go quiet”, and not trouble you. With time, you may get less “flare-ups” and less pain. The main symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis are joint pain and swelling with joint stiffness, especially first thing in the morning or after sitting still for a long time. It is also common to experience a lack of energy/tiredness.

Unfortunately, the cause of these conditions remains unclear. Inflammatory Arthritis cannot be cured; however symptoms can be controlled and managed. This leaflet is aimed to help you reduce symptoms in combination with your arthritis medication and support from other health professionals you may see.

How to cope with a “flare-up”

The most important thing to do is **rest** especially the most inflamed joints.

1. Try not to “work-off” the pain and stiffness, as this will only aggravate the joint, increasing the inflammation and possibly lead to the affected joints becoming damaged.
2. If many joints are affected then it may be beneficial to rest for short periods. If possible try to sit with your feet up, preferably using a footstool. Support your whole leg; do not let your knees hang as this can increase pain and put pressure on heels and other areas.
3. Try to keep your joints in good positions. If you have resting splints then try to wear these. It is most important that you do not put pillows under your knees, as this will encourage them to become bent, and difficult to straighten.

How to relieve pain and inflammation

Both **hot** and **cold** treatments can be beneficial. This will not cure the arthritis but should help to reduce the pain and swelling.

Cold is usually more effective if the joint is swollen and hot. Heat works better for the stiff cool joints and is also beneficial at reducing muscle spasm associated with painful joints.

Do not use if:

- You are prone to poor circulation, especially Raynaud's Disease, or Vasculitis.
- You have reduced sensation/feeling around the painful area, as this may mean that you are unable to tell if you are burning.
- You have heart problems.
- You have diabetes

If in doubt, contact your physiotherapist.

When applying a treatment, remember you could burn if the heat is too hot or if an ice pack is directly applied to your skin

Cold treatments

Leave cold in place for no longer than 10-15 minutes. The skin will become red and will feel numb for a while afterwards. Try not to do too much until this has worn off.

Types of application are as follows:

- A bag of frozen peas wrapped in a damp cloth applied over the area. Take care not to eat them if re-freezing.
- Gel packs, commercially manufactured, can also be used. Wrap in a damp cloth to prevent burns.
- Ice cubes wrapped in a plastic bag are useful if no other means are available but take care with any sharp edges.
- Ice-cube massage can be useful for small areas like finger joints. Wrap an ice-cube in a piece of damp paper towel and gently rub over the affected area for a few minutes.

If you find that the above treatments are too cold, try immersing hands or feet in cool or iced water.

Heat treatments

To avoid burning, the heat should be a pleasant warmth, and not too intense. If it is too hot you also reduce its effectiveness as you use it for shorter periods or move away from it. This can cause strain on other muscles and joints.

Heat should be left in place for 10 to 20 minutes to get maximum muscle relaxation. Examples are:

- A bath or shower can be useful, particularly if you feel stiff in the mornings.
- Soaking your hands or feet in warm water and gently exercising the joints in the warm water can allow your hands to feel more supple.
- Gel or “wheat” packs, or a hot water bottle are useful for specific areas. Wrap these in a towel to help reduce the chance of burning.
- Electric heat pads are also available, but always follow the manufacturer’s instructions.

Exercise

You might be worried that exercise will make your arthritis and its symptoms, such as pain, worse. This is not the case, and studies evaluating exercise programmes have shown that exercise does not make your arthritis worse. Clinical guidelines recommend that people with rheumatoid arthritis “should [exercise to] improve general fitness and be encouraged to complete regular exercise including exercises for enhancing joint flexibility, muscle strength and managing other functional problems.”

It is most important to exercise daily, even when you are having a flare-up, as this will help to maintain your suppleness. Even if you are having a “flare up” or in pain then simply by taking each joint through only one or two repetitions will help to maintain your joint movement.

You must start exercising by doing the activity little but often. **Listen** to your body and be prepared to stop. If your joints are aching after exercising you may have done too much. Have a rest until the ache subsides, then recommence exercising at about half the repetitions. Remember that you cannot “work-off” this stiffness, you will only aggravate it.

As you become more familiar with your exercises, you will be able to recognise when you have lost movement. You will then be able to concentrate on the exercises that regain that movement. By exercising, your muscles will regain their strength. You should be able to maintain a good posture and minimise any joint deformities.

Swimming is a good exercise, as it does not put any weight on the joints. You can also do your exercises in the water. The “baby” pool is usually warmer than the main pool, but

don't expect either to be as warm as the hospital treatment pool. It is advisable to take a large towel onto the poolside to wrap up in to avoid getting too cold.

Walking is beneficial once your arthritis is more controlled. A moderate pace of walking for 20 - 30 minutes a day can help to improve pain and improve well-being. For more information on how to start walking ask your physiotherapist or look at the Walking for Health information on NHS choices which can be found on the Live Well website.

Relaxation

Relaxation can be used to help reduce your pain, by making both body and mind relaxed and calm. When we experience pain, our muscles become tense in order to protect painful areas. When muscles are tense for prolonged periods, they start to produce a cramping pain too. This increases the total pain you are in. By learning to break this vicious cycle with relaxation, you can reduce muscle tension, and thus reduce your pain.

The ability to relax takes time and patience. Online resources and Apps are particularly useful. Try a few different ones to find what suits you. Try to lie down in a quiet room, initially when you are not in too much pain. With daily practice you will find that relaxation becomes easier and more effective when used to manage pain. You may become a little dizzy if you get up too quickly afterwards, so be aware.

Other resources

These are some other resources you may find helpful:

<https://www.versusarthritis.org/>

<https://nras.org.uk/>

<https://www.papaa.org/>

<https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/>

<https://nras.org.uk/resource/the-importance-of-exercise/>

If you have any problems with managing your symptoms and would like further advice, please contact your physiotherapist.

Your Physiotherapist is: Telephone:

Comments, Compliments or Complaints

The Patient Relations/Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) Department provides confidential on the spot advice, information and support to patients, relatives, friends and carers.

Contact Us

Tel: 01942 822376 (Monday to Friday 9am to 4pm)

The Patient Relations/PALS Manager
Wrightington, Wigan and Leigh Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust
Royal Albert Edward Infirmary
Wigan Lane
Wigan WN1 2NN

Ask 3 Questions

Become more involved in decisions about your healthcare. You may be asked to make choices about your treatment. To begin with, try to make sure you get the answers to three key questions:

1. What are my options?
2. What are the pros and cons of each option for me?
3. How do I get support to help me make a decision that is right for me?



How We Use Your Information

For details on how we collect, use and store the information we hold about you, please take a look at our “how we use your information” leaflet which can be found on the Trust website: <https://www.wwl.nhs.uk>

This leaflet is also available in audio, large print, Braille and other languages upon request. For more information please ask in the department/ward.

© Wrightington, Wigan and Leigh Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust
All rights reserved. Not to be reproduced in whole or in part without the permission of the copyright owner.

Call 111 first when it's less urgent than 999.



EMPLOYER RECOGNITION SCHEME

SILVER AWARD

Proudly supporting those who serve.

Phone: 0808 802 1212

Text: 81212

www.veteransgateway.org.uk

