Managing Fatigue with Arthritis

FATIGUE MANAGEMENT



Fatigue is a common problem for people with arthritis, but it is also common in people who do not have arthritis. It is therefore important to try to work out the reasons for fatigue on a personal basis.

Active inflammatory arthritis often causes people to feel generally unwell, and fatigue can be a common part of this. Managing the flare can often make a difference. During a flare, conserving energy, prioritising sleep and healthy eating, and reducing external and internal stresses are all very important. It can also be reassuring to know that the flare will pass.

Feeling fatigued when arthritis inflammation is well controlled is harder to understand and manage, but there are lots of things that can contribute and self-management will help.

Poor sleep, lack of exercise, perimenopause, unhealthy eating, social isolation, medication and low mood can all be factors. Poor sleep quality over prolonged periods will obviously lead to fatigue, although surprisingly this is something that is often overlooked.

Optimise Sleep

Sleep hygiene measures can make a difference. These include having a cool and dark bedroom, using the bed only for sleep and sex, avoiding television in the bedroom and having a relaxing nighttime routine.

- Try to set a regular wake time and bedtime even at the weekends so that your body finds a natural sleep rhythm. Don't worry if you have a bad night's sleep, your brain and body will adjust to help you sleep more deeply the next night.

- Try to avoid heavy meals close to bedtime, reduce caffeine intake including cocoa and avoid too many drinks in the evening. Although alcohol may help you get to sleep, it affects sleep quality, so having some alcohol-free days every week can help with fatigue.

- Listening to a familiar audiobook or white noise can help, as can mindfulness meditation and learning breathing exercises to help quieten a busy brain. Worrying about not sleeping or making too much effort with sleep can also worsen sleep, so trying to be relaxed about whether you sleep can help. Fatigue is a natural result of poor sleep, but it will not cause harm.

- Sleep tracking devices can give a rough idea of sleep, but despite manufacturers' claims, they are not designed to accurately measure sleep stages, for example deep sleep (this requires electrodes attached to the brain to monitor brain activity). If a sleep tracker claims that sleep quality has been poor, it can cause unnecessary worry which will then worsen sleep.

Healthy Eating

The gut microbiome (the microbes that live inside the bowel) is very important for overall health and is increasingly known to be altered in many different chronic diseases, including inflammatory arthritis. The microbiome is known to be important in mood and sleep regulation and becomes disrupted in people who are overweight.

Medicines including NSAIDs and codeine and proton pump inhibitors, which are often prescribed in inflammatory arthritis, can all also affect the microbiome. Minimising unnecessary medicines and feeding the microbiome the foods that it needs to be healthy may help with sleep and fatigue.

These include foods high in fibre, called “prebiotic” foods such as oats, bananas, leeks, barley, chicory and Jerusalem artichokes.

Reducing dietary sugar and highly processed foods and switching to a healthier Mediterranean-type diet with fish, olive oil and plenty of vegetables and fruit can help support a healthy gut microbiome. Making healthier food choices will also help with weight management, which can also help with sleep and fatigue.

Exercise (Especially in the Fresh Air)

Surprisingly, exercise can help with fatigue and sleep quality, but it is difficult to stay motivated if fatigue is severe.

It can be useful to start slowly with walking, even if only for a few minutes. Yoga and tai chi are also useful and can be done from a chair.

Exercise outdoors, especially in bright light earlier in the day, can help beat fatigue and regulate sleep by stimulating melatonin, the body’s natural sleep chemical.

Low Mood

Low mood can contribute to fatigue and lack of enjoyment, so it is important to acknowledge if you are feeling low and to know when to ask for help. Medication may not be needed as talking therapies can help to elevate the mood and fight fatigue. Feelings of guilt and frustration can often contribute, and talking these issues through can help.

Medications

Many medicines can interfere with sleep, and these are often overlooked. Common examples include beta blockers (for example, bisoprolol), opioid medicines, (for example, codeine and tramadol), and

some medicines used to treat anxiety and depression (for example, sertraline or citalopram). Don't stop any of these medicines without discussing this with your prescriber, but switching to an alternative may help.

Menopause and Perimenopause

The perimenopause (the time leading up to the menopause) lasts for an average of about seven years, so it is completely normal to start to feel some symptoms from around the age of 43.

As oestrogen starts to reduce, common symptoms include joint pain, mood changes and sleep problems leading to fatigue, although these symptoms are often overlooked if there are none of the common symptoms, for example hot flushes.

There is no reliable blood test to detect perimenopause in women over 40, so if you are starting to have irregular cycles and symptoms of perimenopause, you probably are perimenopausal.

Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) can help significantly with fatigue and is safe up to the normal age of menopause. Premenopausal women often need higher doses of HRT than postmenopausal women, so if you are already on a low dose of HRT and still have symptoms, see if your dose can be increased before abandoning it.

Social Isolation

Fatigue and social isolation often go hand-in-hand. Feeling tired naturally leads to going out less and often avoiding social activities. This can cause frustration and loneliness, which can worsen fatigue. If you are usually a sociable person, try explaining to friends and family that you feel exhausted and may need to leave a social event early. Supportive others will understand.

Pacing Techniques and Quiet Time

Pacing is all about conserving energy to prioritise the most important activities. Pacing can be hard work to organise, but it can often improve quality of life and fatigue.

Some people like to imagine that they have a certain amount of energy per day and if there is an important event later in the day that will require a lot of energy, they will reduce what they are doing earlier in the day so that they have enough energy left for later.

On a daily level, dividing what needs to be done, for example, housework, into small chunks and having a short rest between tasks can help.

Another way of thinking about pacing is to consider what you typically do if you have more energy on a particular day.

Most of us will try to catch up with all the smaller or less important jobs that need doing, do too much and then suffer more the next day. This is called “boom-or-bust” behaviour and it can be difficult to manage as it is natural to want to get things done.

Although gentle exercise can help with fatigue, joining a gym or starting heavy exercise when feeling a bit better can often make fatigue worse. Instead of trying to catch up on housework or futile tasks on a better day, try an alternative approach to fatigue management which is to work on self-care during these times.

This could include short periods of complete quiet without devices or external distraction, mindfulness, meditation, gentle exercise such as tai chi or yoga, a creative hobby, or just being in the fresh air and finding some quiet, for example being in nature and listening to the birds.

Learn some self-compassion skills, focus on being present in the moment and practice saying “no” to things that you don’t want to do as these will often make fatigue worse.

Useful resources

- Find out more about **Diet and Arthritis**: **https://www.arthritisaction.org.uk/living-with-arthritis/self-management/diet-and-arthritis**
- Visit **Exercise and Arthritis resources**: **https://www.arthritisaction.org.uk/living-with-arthritis/self-management/exercise-and-arthritis**
- Visit **Mental Health and Wellbeing pages**: **https://www.arthritisaction.org.uk/living-with-arthritis/self-management/mental-health-wellbeing**

Useful resources (cont.)

- Learn more about **Menopause and Arthritis**: **https://www.arthritisaction.org.uk/living-with-arthritis/resource-centre/menopause-and-arthritis**

- Meet others living with arthritis at **Online Arthritis Action Groups**: **https://www.arthritisaction.org.uk/arthritis-action-groups**

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