

Everyday activities. and **pain**

Pain is one of the most common symptoms of arthritis. In this article **Lorna Fray** looks at how to manage pain whilst carrying out specific daily activities





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Unwind before bed-time with a book

Making the bed can be difficult when you have arthritis



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If pain is a fact of daily life for you, you are not alone. Arthritis Care's recent pain survey found that 77 per cent of respondents are unable to sleep through the night because of pain. Almost a third of the 2,263 respondents described their pain as frequently unbearable.

As well as discomfort, long-term pain can have a huge impact on life by causing fatigue, low moods and by making regular activities more difficult. Steve Smith, 48, who has rheumatoid arthritis and fibromyalgia, says: 'Pain affects everything – cooking, your relationship, playing with the children.' Angie Leach, 65, who has fibromyalgia and osteoarthritis, adds: 'There's nothing like constant pain for making you bad tempered.'

It is all too easy to get trapped in a negative cycle of pain and stress but arthritis pain can almost always be eased, through medication and adjusting the way you do things. In this article we look at some of the activities that people with arthritis highlighted in Arthritis Care's pain survey as difficult to do and some ways to ease your pain.

Sleep

Sleep is a huge issue for people with arthritis – pain may stop people getting off to sleep, or cause them to wake in the night. Angie explains: 'Quite often I can't sleep. I have nightmares too, from the pain.'

Getting comfortable is crucial. Finding the right mattress can be difficult, so try lots before you buy and lie on them for a reasonable time in the shop. Nicki Gray, an occupational therapist (OT) who specialises in rheumatology, finds that

most people with arthritis benefit from a firm, but not hard, bed. Many people, including Angie, swear by memory foam mattresses or toppers for comfort and warmth, but they may restrict movement as you sink into them.

Experiment to see what works for you, using pillows or cushions to support your body or keep bedding off sore areas (lightweight bedding is also useful for this). Peter Crewe is 49-years-old and has osteoarthritis: 'I have to lie on my back.' Steve surrounds himself with pillows 'so I'm wedged in.'

Make sure that you wind down in the evenings, and avoid caffeine and other stimulants. Keep your bedroom calm, quiet and dark. Taking medication before bed can ease your symptoms enough to help you get some decent sleep. A warm bath or using an electric blanket before you get into bed can help to relax your muscles.

If you can't get to sleep or wake up in the middle of the night, get up and read for a while or do some relaxation exercises before going back to bed. Nicki says: 'Use a mood tape, breathing exercises or focus on visual imagery – whatever works for you.' Steve listens to 'white noise' on his iPod: 'It's the sound of rainfall. It relaxes and distracts me.'

Making the bed

Arthritis Care's survey found that pain stopped 58 per cent of respondents from making the bed – bending, lifting and stretching to do this can often make pain worse. OT Nicki says ask yourself: 'Do you really need to do that?' She advises asking for help, and not making the bed more often than you need to. If



RUTH HOLLINGSWORTH, FROM BEDFORDSHIRE, HAS RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS. SHE IS 34.

'The pain management consultant treats pain, not the cause of the pain. They offered me a pain management programme a year ago. I thought it was really good.'

The biggest balancing act is rest and movement. I may get away with shopping for two hours. Other times, that's out of the question. You find the knack of doing things differently. I squeeze the toothpaste tube under my chin. I couldn't cook a whole meal myself from scratch. I use a food processor for chopping and a hand-held blender.

Being so immobile and on steroids makes my weight difficult to control. I try to limit what I eat. Just a bit of light housework feels like strenuous exercise. My husband makes the bed – I can't. I have a supportive pillow. I use heat packs and guided imagery!



Don't overdo your grocery shopping because arthritis can make lifting and carrying your purchases difficult

Using gadgets can make opening and preparing food easier

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you have a cleaner, add making the bed to their list of weekly tasks.

Steve's partner makes their bed. For Angie, the key is knowing her limits: 'I do what I can. If my husband lifts the bed, I tuck the sheets in. I can't put quilts on.' Denise Brunton, 57, has osteoarthritis and fibromyalgia, and also enlists her husband's help: 'I do manage it but I take pain relief before and rest for half an hour afterwards.'

Lightweight bedding and modern blankets can be helpful, as they are warm but easier to handle than duvets. Fixing velcro to the corners of your duvet and the cover can make the process easier and using fitted sheets means less tucking in. Some people find wrist supports helpful, although OT Nicki advises being measured for these by an occupational therapist rather than buying off the shelf.

Shopping

Half the participants in Arthritis Care's survey can't get to the shops regularly because of the pain caused by travelling to and around shops, and lifting and carrying purchases. Planning ahead and making a shopping list will help you to avoid unnecessary trips. Buying bulky groceries

Photograph by Tessa Newmark



online can limit the amount of walking and carrying you have to do – supermarkets will deliver to your door, or even your kitchen.

Try to restrict shopping to good days, or the best time of day for you. If possible, go shopping at a quiet time, so your journey is easier and shops are less crowded. Don't be afraid to ask a friend or shop staff for help with reaching items and packing or carrying bags. Angie's husband tends to drive her and carry everything when they go shopping.

Mobility scooters can enable you to travel further distances than on foot. Denise says of hers: 'It's given me a new lease of life. Before, I couldn't walk a quarter of the way around Costco.' Many supermarkets and shopping centres have scooters that shoppers can borrow, although the baskets are not always large enough for a weekly shop.

WORK WITH YOUR DOCTOR

'Your relationship with your GP is vital,' says occupational therapist Nicki Gray. Angie discusses medication with her GP, which makes her feel more in control. But more than half of the participants in Arthritis Care's survey don't seek help until their pain becomes unbearable – and many people think nothing can be done for their pain.

When communicating with health professionals, GP Carol Cooper advises: 'Explain where the pain is and what seems to trigger it. Explain what pain stops you doing, the impact it has on your life and whether it wakes you up at night.'

Doctors do more than give out pills. They can refer you to pain clinics, physiotherapists and occupational therapists. This expertise may also be in your rheumatology department. Peter has osteoarthritis and sees a physiotherapist. 'My knee affects my posture. The physiotherapist gives me exercises that help with muscle strengthening and balance.'

Steve and Denise have attended courses on managing their arthritis (Steve through the NHS, Denise through Arthritis Care). Both found their courses useful in developing coping strategies and action plans.

OT Nicki says: 'If you're using public transport, take a wheelie trolley. Try not to lift and carry if you can get away with pulling.' She also recommends using a shallow trolley in supermarkets, to reduce bending.

Cooking

Like over half of the participants in the pain survey, Steve finds cooking difficult. The lifting and carrying involved with cooking takes too much out of him and he struggles with tasks, such as peeling vegetables, that require fine motor skills. The family buys more prepared food than before, his partner lifts things in and out of the oven and Steve focuses on the washing up, because the warmth helps his hands.

OT Nicki endorses this approach. If you enjoy cooking and want to do it, she suggests limiting other activities so you have enough energy to cook. 'If it's a chore, buy prepared food,' she says. For example, buying frozen prepared vegetables can make life easier. Alternatively, you could cook in bulk on good days and freeze food.

Using small pans and a few gadgets, Denise manages to cook for herself and her husband. 'I put what we use most at the front of the cupboards.' ➡ p14



Cuddling can help with pain relief as it makes you more relaxed

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Under the sink we've got boxes I can slide out.' But cooking for bigger groups is too much for Denise – if her family comes round for a meal, they have to help her in the kitchen.


Everyone seems to have a favourite cooking gadget, from jar openers to electric can openers and mini food processors. Denise has a container with a chopper in the lid: 'You just push the lid down.' Lightweight pans with handles can make a difference, as can sliding things along worktops instead of carrying them, and only filling the kettle as much as you need to. You don't have to buy expensive items – OT Nicki suggests using foam to bulk up utensils or knobs to make gripping easier. Angie keeps scissors to hand and cuts or stabs packets open. You could try perching on a stool whilst chopping vegetables to conserve your energy.

Physical affection

65 per cent of respondents to Arthritis Care's survey have difficulty hugging and 63 per cent have difficulty having sex because these activities hurt. There is lots of hugging at Denise's church: 'I say: "Gentle hugs" or "Please don't do that, it hurts".' Angie tends to hug people rather than vice versa, as it's more comfortable: 'My husband has to be very careful.'

Sex is another concern. 'Sex is a problem. The issue might be you not wanting sex because of the consequences, or your partner doesn't want to put you through it,' admits Steve. Ruth says: 'Sometimes sex is totally off the list. Cuddling helps with pain relief as it makes you more relaxed.' Carol Cooper, a GP and former rheumatologist, agrees: 'Sex is a great way of relieving pain, but unfortunately you can get ragged out in the process. Pace yourself. Decide what's important.' OT Nicki says: 'Planning ahead is not very romantic but sometimes it needs to be done. Have a warm bath or shower first, it could even become part of your lovemaking.'

Allow yourself to do things differently. Experiment with positions – perhaps lying on your side or straddling your partner, using pillows for support. GP Carol says: 'Consider taking painkillers beforehand, and non-penetrative ways of being close when pain is too much.' Talk to your partner about what you want and what hurts. The more open you are, the better. Carol suggests saying to your partner: 'It's OK to tell me when you're in the mood. I'm in the mood too, but my hips aren't.'

There will always be good days and bad days but the most important aspect of pain management is finding out what works best for you. This takes time, practice and support to get right, but it is worth the effort. 

PAIN MANAGEMENT TECHNIQUES

Experiment to see what eases your pain. Keeping a pain diary may help you to keep track.

Gentle exercise and stretching helps with mobility and muscle strength to support your joints. If exercise causes unusual pain, stop and ask your physiotherapist for advice.

Keeping your weight down through a combination of a healthy diet and exercise will reduce the strain on your joints.

Relaxing your mind and body can reduce pain. As well as resting, try relaxation techniques such as breathing exercises or meditation on a CD or at a class.

Distraction will help to stop pain dominating your life. Spend time doing things you enjoy. You could also try imagining pleasant images or scenes.

Warming baths or showers, microwave heat packs and stick-on heat pads can all help to relax muscles and ease pain.

Massage is a good way to relax muscles and soothe the pain, whether you or someone else does it.

The right medication is vital. Take all drugs in the way outlined on your prescription, to maximise the benefit. Ask a pharmacist how to take over-the-counter pain relief. If you aren't happy with your medication, see your doctor.

Adjusting your posture so you don't stiffen up or overload particular muscles and joints can work wonders. Physiotherapists can advise on positions and techniques.

Pacing yourself isn't easy, but it works. Listen to your body, and take breaks when you begin to tire or when your symptoms worsen.

FURTHER HELP

From Arthritis Care:

- the free helpline – call 0808 800 4050 (10am–4pm weekdays)
- the *Coping with Pain* booklet
- a free Challenging Pain course, which covers pain management techniques
- a new awareness and fundraising campaign highlighting the pain experienced by people with arthritis. Fight Back Against Pain focuses on the impact of pain, and how Arthritis Care can help
- www.arthritiscare.org.uk for more information.

From elsewhere:

- ask your GP or visit www.nhs.uk to find out about pain management programmes and pain clinics
- the British Pain Society can provide details of pain clinics and courses: www.britishpainsociety.org.uk