



A flare-up

Lorna Fray looks at how to prepare for and manage flare-ups of inflammatory arthritis

Many people with inflammatory arthritis have times when the inflammation, pain or swelling from their condition suddenly become worse, sometimes along with feeling generally tired and unwell. These are known as 'flare-ups'.

Flare-ups are most commonly associated with inflammatory forms of arthritis, such as rheumatoid arthritis (RA), psoriatic arthritis and ankylosing spondylitis. In these conditions, a person's immune system causes swelling in their joints and general illness.

Dr Richard Hull, consultant rheumatologist at Portsmouth Hospitals, defines a flare-up as 'an acute, often temporary worsening of symptoms. It's not just having a bad day.' Flare-ups can last anything from a couple of days to weeks. They may be temporary, or a sign that your arthritis is progressing.

In the early months after diagnosis it can be tricky to differentiate between your active arthritis and a flare-up. Even if you've had arthritis for a while, flare-ups can be challenging. But there are steps you can take to lessen their impact.

What are flare-ups like?

Common symptoms include more stiffness and pain than usual, and having hot, red or visibly swollen joints, which may interfere with daily life and sleep. You may feel generally unwell or fatigued and emotionally drained.

Christine Thornley is 32 and has RA flare-ups every couple of months: 'It's like wading through treacle – everything suddenly becomes difficult. It's very painful and I get very stiff. My knees and feet are red and swollen but I also get very



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pale, because of the fatigue. Sometimes it'll get better over a few days. Other times, it seems to go on forever.'

One challenge of flare-ups can be their unpredictability. Valerie Pope, who is 72 and has ankylosing spondylitis, says: 'Flare-ups literally hit me overnight.' For Mel McLean flare-ups tend to come on more

gradually. 'Over, maybe, a week I start to feel really tired and ache more.' Flare-ups can change over time as well. 'Sometimes they last for two weeks, sometimes months. I can feel a flare coming on now. My ability to concentrate on things is suffering. That's making me feel very stressed and emotional,' says Mel, who is 33 and has RA and psoriatic arthritis.

Colin Beevor is a rheumatology nurse specialist. He agrees that people find flare-ups emotionally challenging: 'There can be a sense of helplessness – you don't know what to do to make things better. If you have a hot and swollen joint you may know what helps, but if you're feeling generally unwell, it's hard to know what to do.'

What causes flare-ups?

Sometimes flare-ups have a clear 'trigger', but often their causes are unclear.

You're more likely to have flare-ups soon after diagnosis, before your arthritis is fully under control, or if you change your medication for any reason – for instance if you plan to start a family. Flare-ups can also be a sign of your arthritis progressing, or medication becoming less effective. See the box for possible warning signs.

Specialist nurse Colin lists common triggers as 'stress, or infections such as a cold or flu. Sometimes people get a flare-up after they've had surgery or a baby. Smoking is an aggravating factor.' Stress is usually the culprit for Christine and Mel. For Valerie, flare-ups can be triggered by 'a trauma to the body, like when I fell down the stairs last year.'



Flare-ups can be emotionally challenging for those who have to deal with them

➔ p10



Accept help instead of exhausting yourself. Focus on doing tasks that are important or enjoyable.

Managing flare-ups

Don't ignore flare-ups, because unchecked inflammation can cause lasting joint damage. Keeping notes or a 'health passport' (see further information box) is a good way to track your symptoms, treatment and activities to establish what triggers and eases your flare-ups.

Painkillers don't tackle the cause of flare-ups, but they can make life easier. Take them at regular intervals rather than when pain becomes unbearable. Christine uses an iPhone app, rxmind.me, to tell her when her next dose is due. Anti-inflammatory medication and cream can help to reduce swelling if you use them as directed by your pharmacist or doctor.

Some people with arthritis find heat and cold soothing. Cold packs are used to reduce swelling and can be used along with heat to aid your recovery as swelling begins to subside. Heat packs should not be used on a joint or area of skin that is very inflamed or in the first 48-72 hours after an injury. If you have circulatory problems, seek medical advice before trying heat or cold therapy.

Inflammation around joints can make them vulnerable, so some people find using a stick or splints helpful – Mel wears hand splints. Ensure that any aids you use are properly fitted and maintained, and consult a specialist before trying new ones.

It's tempting to crawl into bed when you have a flare-up, but inactivity can make your range of movement worse and lead to greater strain on your joints. Try to do some physical activity every day, but don't push yourself too much. If in doubt, get advice. Valerie swims three times a week: 'In a flare-up it's painful but I still go – you've got to keep moving and there's a social side of it too.'

Accept help instead of exhausting yourself. Focus on doing tasks that are important or enjoyable, and try not to berate yourself for things you can't manage. Christine explains: 'We decided to get a cleaner for a couple of hours a week and my mother-in-law comes to help with my little boy.' Valerie's husband helps more around the house when she has a flare-up. ➔ p12

Painkillers don't tackle the cause of flare-ups, but they can make life easier

While Colin explains that flare-ups 'are not necessarily triggered by overdoing things', many people with arthritis believe that overexerting themselves is a contributory factor.

Immunisations can trigger flare-ups in some people but they are important for the general wellbeing of many people with inflammatory arthritis, so it is important to discuss this issue with your doctor.

Some people's flare-ups follow seasonal patterns. For example, Mel has noticed that her arthritis flares more in spring and autumn and less if she has been somewhere sunny.

Preparing for flare-ups

Colin advises: 'Have a plan so you don't have to panic.' Mel agrees: 'Preparing makes me feel better psychologically.' Writing your plan down will make it easier for you and others to refer to.

Consider who can offer practical help. Delegate housework tasks to other family members, or arrange for a neighbour to help with the school run or shopping. Have a few easy-to-prepare meals ready in your freezer and stock up on heat/cold packs. Make sure you have enough medication in the house, including painkillers and perhaps anti-inflammatory tablets or cream.

At work, talk to your manager about contingency arrangements. This might include working from home, a temporary change in your duties, taking more breaks or receiving extra support.

POSSIBLE WARNING SIGNS

Flare-ups can start with no warning, but the following may be signs of an impending flare-up:

- increased stiffness, or 'morning' stiffness that lasts all day
- feeling more physical or emotional fatigue than usual
- pain when resting, for example if your joints won't 'settle' at night.

If you notice these signs, it is a good idea to slow down a little and make a few preparations. See 'Managing flare-ups'.



Keep up with gentle exercises during a flare-up

Try not to let your flare-up take over your life. Distraction will help you to manage your pain, and relaxation will actually reduce it. Christine finds work a positive distraction and says: 'I relax by lying on the sofa and watching a film. I go for a walk with my headphones on to block out the world or I chat with a friend.' Valerie is retired, but keeps herself busy by volunteering.

If things start to get on top of you, try writing down your concerns or have a good cry to let off steam. Mel also recommends a break from your usual environment – perhaps visiting a friend.

Working with healthcare professionals

If a flare-up lasts longer than several days,

is unusual for you or is worrying you, seek medical help. Specialist nurse Colin is clear: 'It's easier to get somebody out of a flare-up when it's at an earlier stage. Don't wait until your next appointment – things may be worse then. We can often advise people over the phone, or reorganise an appointment.'

Healthcare professionals can help you to manage flare-ups in several ways, depending on your needs. They may:

- conduct blood tests or scans to assess whether your symptoms are temporary or a sign of disease progression
- prescribe painkillers or steroids to reduce discomfort and swelling
- review your medication if your flare-ups are frequent or if your arthritis is getting worse

- refer you to other services, such as physiotherapy, occupational therapy or emotional support
- advise you on managing flare-ups yourself.

Work together with your healthcare team to manage your flare-ups and make the right treatment choices for you. This is sometimes known as shared decision making. Keeping notes about patterns in your symptoms and flare-ups will assist this process.

Mel says: 'My rheumatologist sends me for scans to check that the flare-up isn't further deterioration. We discuss relaxation techniques, and he asks whether physio or a massage would help. A steroid injection is usually what happens. Although they're a short-term solution, anything is a blessing.'

Christine says of her consultant: 'She's good at working with me to do preventative things.' On several occasions, Christine has had steroid injections before stressful situations, such as a work trip to Kenya, to minimise flare-ups. Her consultant also arranged occupational therapy: 'It's been very helpful for coping around the house and with my son.'

Valerie hadn't been under the care of a rheumatologist for years, but requested an appointment during her last flare-up. He referred her to a physiotherapist: 'He gave me some exercises which I did religiously and I can move my neck now.'

Dr Hull emphasises that treatment of inflammatory arthritis has changed dramatically in the last decade: 'We're less happy for people to live with much disease activity. If you're getting too many flare-ups, we try to get your symptoms controlled. The aim is to abolish as much disease activity as possible (often called treat to target). This may not be possible because you may already be on optimum therapies or for some other reason.' **an**

TIPS TO MINIMISE FLARE-UPS

There are no guarantees, but doing the following things should help you to manage your arthritis and lessen the likelihood and severity of any flare-ups.

- Take your medication correctly.
- Pace yourself.
- Manage your stress levels.
- Look after your general health.
- Protect your joints.
- Work with your healthcare team.
- Plan ahead for future flare-ups.
- Enjoy life.
- If you are not controlling your disease you may need to discuss changing or starting treatment with your rheumatology team.

FURTHER INFORMATION

- Arthritis Care's website – www.arthritiscare.org.uk – has lots of information and factsheets on living with arthritis, and a discussion forum to share tips with others. Call our free helpline on 0808 800 4050 for confidential support.
- Visit www.rxmind.me or the Apple app store for more information on this application to help you keep track of your medication.
- Visit www.worldarthritisday.org/resources/people-with-rmd to download a health passport to keep a record of your medication and symptoms.