



INFLAMMATORY ARTHRITIS FLARE-UPS

Inflammatory arthritis (IA) is a group of autoimmune diseases which occur when the immune system attacks healthy tissue, particularly the lining of the joints. This sets up a cycle of inflammation around the joint and may cause damage to nearby connective tissue, such as tendons and ligaments, as well as tiredness and general unwellness. IA can also affect other organs of the body.

IA includes many types of arthritis, such as Rheumatoid Arthritis, Systemic Lupus Erythematosus (SLE), Juvenile Idiopathic Arthritis (JIA), Reactive Arthritis, Sjögren's Syndrome, Psoriatic Arthritis, Ankylosing Spondylitis, Scleroderma, and many others.

While medications can keep your condition under control, from time to time you may experience a flare of joint pain and your other symptoms. An important aspect of self-management of an IA is recognising flares, learning what triggers them and what works for you to reduce their impact on your daily life. Flares are usually temporary; however, if a flare lasts longer than you normally experience or affects your quality of life, discuss this with your medical team.

Recognising a flare

A flare is when symptoms of an IA temporarily worsen. If you have a flare it's not because you've done something wrong, they are part of your IA.

Symptoms to look out for:

- Increase in pain and swelling in one or more joints,
- Increased stiffness, especially in the morning,
- More tiredness, less mobility, trouble sleeping, anxiety, and
- emotional stress.

Predictable flares

Over time, you may notice patterns, or triggers of your IA – a thing or an event such as stress, lack of sleep, injury, other illnesses or infections, demanding physical activity, changes in medications or other things that happen in your life. A diary can help you keep track of whether these things set off your IA - including changes in your regular blood tests.

Unpredictable flares

The first flare experience can be hard to manage. Please reach out to your rheumatology nurse, the Arthritis NZ helpline or reach out to patient support groups either online, or in person for advice and try some of the suggestions below or from others living with an IA. For people who have managed flares in the past, a flare that 'comes out of nowhere' or is more severe than expected may need to contact their medical team – it may be a sign of another illness or infection, or that your medications need to be changed.



Treatment

If there is a trigger, try to avoid it if you can. This can mean taking some time for yourself. Making a plan ahead of time for extra rest, time off work, or someone to help with the children/housework is a good strategy.

Rest is important, especially when coping with tiredness. But stopping all activity is likely to make stiffness worse and impact on your overall health. Keep moving and do gentle range of motion exercises like Tai Chi and basic Pilates. Compression gloves and socks or braces and splints and other assistive devices and equipment can help keep you moving. Don't feel guilty if you must turn down invitations or work requests. Prioritise your health by managing your responsibilities if you can (for example, by talking to your employer so they are aware). Break up tasks that can't be avoided, for example, five minutes gardening, then five minutes rest will take the pressure off your joints.



Use home remedies that work for you, and don't interfere with your prescribed medications. Try hot and cold packs – hot for pain, cold for inflammation; relaxation techniques such as mindfulness and breathing exercises, and changing the activity-rest balance.

If you haven't been taking the full dose of your prescribed pain relief medications, do that now. If you have made a plan with your medical team for extra pain relief to take during a flare start this as soon as you wonder if this could be a flare.

Other people living with an IA can provide a lot of good advice. If the flare doesn't ease, do contact a member of your medical team such as your GP or rheumatology nurse for advice.

When to contact a health professional

- If this is the first flare you have experienced, contact your rheumatology nurse for advice.
- If the flare goes beyond your usual experience, contact your medical centre or rheumatology nurse within a few days. Your medications may no longer be controlling the inflammation and without quick treatment, you may risk joint damage.
- If pain and inflammation mean that you cannot sleep, or do activities that are essential, talk to your GP to discuss temporary pain relief such as non-steroidal anti-inflammatories or a short course of corticosteroids, such as prednisone.
- Even if you experience regular flares that you are managing, it's important to tell your rheumatologist at your next appointment. If your blood tests don't show these flares, your diary or photos of joints (if they are inflamed) taken during a flare may help. If you have more problems using your joints after a flare, discuss this with your rheumatologist at your next appointment. The aim of treatment is low disease activity without disabling flares.

**Be kind to yourself - Connect with others -
Phone Arthritis NZ on 0800 663 463 for support**

This Arthritis NZ Fact Sheet was clinically reviewed by Dr Emma Dunning, Healthify He Puna Waiora (formerly Health Navigator NZ), 2023.

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