Jump Into Spring With More Exercise, Rest and Remedies for RA

by ERIC PATTERSON

Get Into Spring With These Remedies for RA

It is time to celebrate. The days are getting longer. The weather is beginning to change for the better, and the birds are chirping right outside your window. Spring is here and not a moment too soon.

Winter only lasts for three months, but it has a way leaving its mark. The cold nights and the dark days manage to bring you down as the vibrant colors that accompany spring, summer and fall give way to grey and white leaving you with a less satisfying life. This dissatisfaction presents in two ways: the physical and the mental. Both are problematic and need to be remedied.

For you, you know the physical impact all too well. Your rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is typically worse in the cold of the winter. People with RA commonly associate changing weather with changing symptoms. Some people complain that humid days are the worst while others say that wet is better. Others report that changing barometric pressures are the biggest trigger for their RA symptoms. What most people can generally agree on, though, is that warmer weather is better for RA pain.

The mental impact of the winter may not be something that you have thought about before, but it is worth acknowledging. Remember, RA is a form of chronic pain. People with chronic pain tend to have more depressive symptoms overall. Compounding the issue, many people have a seasonal component to their depression. This means that in the winter, depressive symptoms are worse. You may have found yourself sleeping more, having less energy and feeling more pessimistic over the winter months. That's the bad news.

8 Great Springtime Remedies

The good news is that winter is over. Spring brings with it opportunity, opportunity to improve your RA, shake off the winter blues and get back to a life worth living. Here's more good news: The things you can do to improve your RA will improve your mood and vice versa.

- **Exercise**. By now, you have heard people speak at length about the benefits of exercise. Your doctors tell you that your pain may decrease with a regular program of walking or swimming. Your friends tell you about how their moods and energy improved after they started going to the gym. At this point, it is not about hearing the benefits; it is about finding a system that works for you. To start the process, think back on your exercise goals from last spring. What did you plan to do and what did you actually do? What were your successes and what were your barriers? If you can accurately analyze what did not work, you can be better prepared to find success this year. Some people come on too strong while others are never committed in the first place. If you tried doing it alone last year, get a group started. If you burned out from exercising daily, start slower and build up to a few days per week. Exercise has such a profound impact on your physical and mental well-being that it is worth trying again until you have achieved this goal.
- **Make better food choices**. Your exercise program segues well into the food you eat. Similarly, you know the positive outcomes of a well-rounded diet. You know that eating ice cream covered with nacho cheese

and French fries is not the path to a long, healthy life. Take this time to reflect on your eating habits. What stands in the way of you making better choices? Many people lose a lot of mobility in the winter. Perhaps, your RA symptoms were worse, your motivation was poor or the winter roads were too dangerous to make it to the grocery store. Perhaps, you choose convenience over nutrition. Try to plan your meals throughout the week so that you do not let hunger decide on dinner. Cutting out the most negative elements of your diet can make a big difference. Reducing sugary beverages will make a profound impact on your weight, RA and mood. Again, involve trusted supports to gain information on how they manage their diets.

- **Focus on quality rest**. During the winter, you may find yourself napping more, having less energy during the day and broken sleep at night. This is common for people with RA that have mood symptoms associated with depression. As spring comes, work to set a sleep goal. Rather than focus on hours of sleep, have your goal focused on the level of rest you receive. Rate your rest 30 minutes after you wake to gauge how that sleep was. If the rating is high, recall and redo the routine from the night before. If the rating is low, begin to explore modifications that could make a good difference. Experiment with bedtimes, sleeping conditions, bedroom temperatures, linens and sleeping positions. More sleep does not equal better sleep. Research alarms to wake up soon and compare results.
- **Change your mind**. The bleak, lifeless nature of winter has a negative impact on your thinking patterns. The winter taught you to think in more depressed, pessimistic ways. Begin the fight towards optimism by tracking your thoughts. Thinking about what you're thinking about may seem like a new concept, but it is one that can improve your pain and mood tremendously. Once you gain information about your thoughts, test them. Do they make sense? If someone else thought this way, would you agree with them or believe that these thoughts were a byproduct of depression? If depression appears to be the root, pull it out by replacing the negative thought with a positive one. For example, thinking that RA is terrible and you will never find relief will only lead to worse symptoms. Conversely, thinking that RA is a pain but taking steps can improve your state and well-being will spark a sense of hope and optimism. It will be small at first but grow over time.
- **Appreciate the world around you**. Look at the world around you. As the weather improves, new life pushes forth from the ground. Baby birds crack through the egg and make their first attempts at flight. The grass gets greener as leaves recover on the trees. The world is a beautiful, wondrous place. Spending time each day appreciating nature and the world that surrounds you is time well spent. This process will increase gratitude while making your unwanted symptoms feel a bit less significant compared to the vastness of the world.
- **Get back into appointments**. The same issues that make it a challenge to head to the grocery store during winter negatively impact your ability to attend appointments. Whether it is your RA doctor, primary care physician or therapist, make spring the time that you recommit to your appointments. No good can come from appointments you do not attend. Each meeting brings the chance for change. It is a chance worth taking.
- **Visit with friends**. If you stay in the house more during winter, chances are that you have less contact with the important people in your life. Less contact becomes cabin fever and boredom. These encourage you to think more negatively as you dwell on your symptoms. Work to mend friendships that were neglected over the winter and to find new ones. As long as the connections are strong and based on mutual respect, more friends is always better than less friends.
- **Don't overdo it**. Again, this is a tip that takes some reflection on the past to provide a plan for the future. What is your behavior pattern when spring begins? Do you take it slow and steady or do you bust out of the wintertime doldrums only to overdo it? This is an appropriate area to use caution. Just like with exercise, the goal is not to see how quickly you can injure yourself or how severely you can worsen your symptoms. Spring is about gingerly reemerging into the world with the goal being long-term, sustained success. Slow and steady is a nice pace to take.

Conclusion

Spring is synonymous with rebirth and new beginnings. Take this occasion to gain a refreshed perspective on the world around you and on your RA. Let spring re-energize you to accomplish astounding feats that make life better. Working hard in the spring will make next winter more bearable. It's time to spring into action.