Grocery Shopping and RA: How to Stay Pain-Free and Well Fed

by MARIAH LEACH

Tips for Grocery Shopping With RA

When you're dealing with pain and fatigue from rheumatoid arthritis (RA), everyday tasks can seem extremely challenging, like grocery shopping with RA.

I've certainly experienced times when the thought of going to the grocery store has been too much for me – let alone cook! But both are necessary tasks, especially as a mom! But there are some things you can do to make grocery shopping easier when you're living with RA.

Consider Your Online Options

These days, there are more and more options online when it comes to food. One possibility is boxed meal services, which send all necessary ingredients in the proper proportions as well as simple, step-by-step instructions for preparing a nice meal.

Honestly, these boxed meal services have worked great to give me a break from shopping and cooking altogether, as my husband enjoys preparing them! It isn't in our budget to order these services all the time, but they do make for a nice treat or backup plan to make things easier if I'm going through a difficult time.

Perhaps more cost-effective than boxed meal services are online grocery services. These range from full service, with grocery delivery right to your front door, to curbside pickup, where you don't even have to get out of your car.

I haven't personally made use of these services, as a trip to the grocery store alone sometimes doubles as a much-needed break from my small children! But I do have friends with chronic illnesses – and even just friends who are busy moms – who swear by online grocery shopping.

So if you're currently struggling to get your grocery shopping done these services are actually worth considering. My grocery store even offers special coupons to people shopping online with curbside pickup!

Prepare in Advance

If you plan to head to the grocery store yourself, I think the best way to make the trip easier is to prepare in advance. For me, this means having a comprehensive list of everything I'll need to buy.

My husband and I actually have a shared list, synced between our phones, so either of us can add items when we think of them or run out of something. I find I'm much more likely to end up with what I need if I write it down right away!

I also use my list to make a note of any coupons I have (paper or digitally downloaded from my grocery store's app), particular brands I want to consider, and prescriptions that need to be picked up (using my grocery store's

pharmacy helps combine errands, saving me time and energy).

Before I head to the store, I also try to do a bit of meal planning for the week and add those items to my list as well, which saves me from having to go grocery shopping as often.

Having a shopping routine and organized list can also help you save time and energy. For example, I always start in the produce section, move to the meat department, the bakery, then dairy, etc. Since I know my own routine, I try to put items on my list in the order I'll come across them while shopping.

I also try to group similar items together on my list, which helps me make sure I get everything I need from one section before moving on to the next.

Lastly, if your schedule allows, it can be useful to do your shopping at off-peak hours so the store will be less crowded. With fewer people in the store, it will be easier to navigate and find employees if you need assistance. You'll also spend less time waiting in line at the checkout.

Items to Make Cooking Easier

When you're deciding what to buy at the grocery store, keep in mind how you'll be using these items when you get home. If you're having difficulties in the kitchen – lifting, chopping, etc. – you can make choices at the grocery store to make your life easier at home.

For example, buying in bulk may be economical, but large packages are heavy and may be difficult for you to lift – and putting the item into your grocery cart isn't the only time you'll have to lift it! It may make sense to opt for the smaller package so it will be easier for you to handle when you use it at home.

Additionally, most produce sections offer fruits and vegetables that are already washed, peeled, and sliced, which can save you time and energy in the kitchen. Did you know you can always ask an employee at the butcher counter to slice or cube meats for you so you won't have to do it yourself?

While buying smaller, pre-prepped items can sometimes be a bit more expensive; the convenience may be worth the extra cost if you've been struggling to cook at home.

Batch Cook When You're Feeling Well

When I'm doing well with my RA, I like to plan a bigger than usual grocery shopping trip and then spend a day or afternoon cooking big batch meals.

Getting a lot of shopping and cooking done when I'm feeling up to it allows me to skip the grocery store when I'm flaring and still have healthy meals ready to go in my freezer. And because making big batches requires more ingredients, I'm able to save money by buying in bulk.

Being economical when I have the time and energy allows me to splurge on pre-prepped items when I'm struggling. My favorite things to cook in big batches include soups and stews, meatloaf and meatballs, lasagnas, and freezer crockpot meals.

I do want to caution that batch cooking takes planning and practice! I recommend starting on the smaller side, so you can figure out how many batches cooking you can handle without wearing yourself out!

Additional Tips for a Better Grocery Shopping With RA

Although your degree of mobility and your specific schedule will each play a part in your shopping routine, there are some general ways to alleviate shopping stress:

- **Keep lists short and bags small**. It may seem more efficient to do one large shop each week, but

picking out and carting around a week's worth of groceries will put a lot of pressure on your stiff and aching joints – an experience that could leave you far more fatigued than you had imagined. Shorter grocery lists will help, as will smaller reusable bags: since they hold less, each one will be easier to lift.

- **Have someone tag along**. Pushing, reaching, lifting and carrying can add up to a lot of pain and fatigue, so shop with a friend who will be able to take care of the manual labor. If this isn't an option, ask your supermarket if they could provide a personal shopper or at least a customer service assistant who can spare a few minutes to help you complete your list.
- **Stick to your neighborhood**. If possible, shop for your produce, meat and baked goods at a local market. The less you have to travel the better you'll feel, and it's always a good idea to make friends with your local food vendors. In many cases, they will be happy to help you out by discounting a big order, loading the groceries into your car, or pulling together your order in advance and putting it aside, so it's ready to go when you arrive.

Prepare Well and Have a Back-up Plan

Get the most bang for your buck by creating a healthy, succinct and affordable grocery list before you head out.

Learn about all the inflammation-fighting ingredients you should be eating, and use one of the many online recipe sites to find fresh and easy ways to work in your RA-friendly foods. Stick to the list, avoiding impulse buys like chips and candy, and you shouldn't have too much trouble staying within your budget.