

Parenting with Rheumatoid Arthritis

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Being a parent can be challenging for anyone, but it may be even more so for people living with a chronic (long-lasting) condition such as rheumatoid arthritis (RA). Trying to keep up with all of a newborn's needs—feedings, lifting and carrying, changing diapers, and bathing (coupled with a general lack of sleep)—may be even more difficult when you're dealing with a chronic disease, let alone an RA flare.

As your child grows, he or she will likely want to involve you in even more physically demanding activities, such as play wrestling or a game of one-on-one basketball. You may even feel peer pressure as a new parent to do things you see others doing with their children at the park or playgroups.

The good news is that there are things you can do to help balance being a parent, maximize your health and wellness, and manage your RA at the same time. The tips below may help you get started. Be sure to talk with your healthcare provider to learn more about these and other steps you can take and before starting any exercise program.

What is RA?

RA is a chronic (long-lasting) disease in which your immune system mistakenly attacks healthy cells in your body. This leads to inflammation and swelling in your joints, usually in the hands, wrists, and knees.

Tips to help you parent with RA

Make sleep a priority Many Americans don't get enough sleep. Now imagine having a chronic condition such as RA that may make getting a good night's sleep even more difficult because of pain or other issues. The fact is, more than 80% of people with RA say they feel fatigued—a situation often made worse by the sleep difficulties many of them face on a regular basis. Think of it as the difference between people who start the day with a full tank of gas in a car (those who don't have RA) and people who start with only half a tank and burn the gas at a faster rate (those with RA).

Because sleep is so important, parents of newborns and infants should try to sleep when their child is sleeping. Try not to use your child's sleep time to catch up on chores. If possible, ask your partner or a friend to help so you can get the rest you need.

It's also important to develop good sleep habits. These include:

Making your bedroom a place for sleep—not for storing piles of laundry, reading books, or watching TV. Avoiding large meals before bedtime. Staying away from bright lights and electronic screens before bedtime.

Avoid overuse injuries Overuse injuries (doing the same movements over and over) may lead to inflammation, muscle strain, and tissue damage—even in people who don't have a chronic condition such as RA. People with RA are already at risk for these types of injuries because they may already have inflammation or irritation in their joints.

Additional joint damage as a result of the effect of the disease on their joints may affect their mobility and joint function. Then there are the daily challenges of raising a baby such as bathing, feeding, and dressing. Here are examples of things you can do to help lessen the risk of overuse injuries:

Using a feeding pillow to position your baby instead of holding him or her. Selecting clothes for your baby with Velcro or magnetized closures rather than buttons or snaps. Asking your partner to help you lift your baby. Using lightweight strollers and testing them in the store before buying one. Using special sponges that support your baby in the bathtub. Using your arms (not just your hands) when you lift your baby. Looking into assistive devices such as bath basins that drain directly into the sink and wash mitts.

Educate your family and friends Family members and friends may not understand the challenges you face as a person with RA. To help overcome this, try to bring your family and friends to RA support group meetings. Seeing and hearing what it's like for other people to live with RA could help your family and friends understand why it's so important for them to provide the help and support you may need.

Take care of your mental health

Taking care of your mental health is an important part of managing your overall health. As a parent with RA, you may feel isolated and have many questions about what to expect. Talk with your healthcare provider about counseling services or support groups that may be available to you. You can also talk with him or her about the possible health benefits of activities such as yoga. Small studies have shown that yoga may improve physical symptoms such as joint pain and stiffness and psychological symptoms such as stress and anxiety.

"It can be hard for others to understand why someone with RA can't do things like pick up a baby or open a jar, but when there are no visible signs of a disease, it can be harder to comprehend the lack of strength or dexterity. Filling the knowledge and education gaps about living with RA for friends and family, or even co-workers, is critical."

Andrew Koenig, DO, FACR

Involve your children As they get older, your children will likely have many questions about RA. Take the time to teach them about the condition and how it impacts you (and your family). Then let them help in age-appropriate ways by:

Helping you take care of your health. For example, they can warm up your hot packs or bring you something to eat or snack on. Helping you with daily tasks that you may have difficulty with such as opening bags, turning doorknobs, and tying shoes. Giving them household chores, such as taking out the garbage, emptying the dishwasher, or walking the dog.

Focus on the good Being a parent with RA presents many challenges, but it can also provide opportunities to teach your child important life lessons and also to bond as a family. Consider the following:

Focus on what your child can learn from your condition—things such as developing coping skills, empathy, and compassion. Do activities that everyone can participate in. For example, play board games, go for walks, or go to a show. Stay positive. Being defeated in front of your child may lead them to feel defeated as well. Being positive can help you build and maintain a healthy relationship.

“Get plenty of sleep, take your medicine, eat right, exercise the way your doctor recommends. Let people help you and don’t be afraid to allow others to offer help. You get recognized by being a great person and a loving, caring parent—not because you carried nine bags of groceries and refused help doing it.”

Andrew Koenig, DO, FACR

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