

Management of an arthritis flare

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What is an arthritis flare?

Pain from arthritis varies from time to time. A flare is the term used to describe an increase in pain, swelling and stiffness in a joint.

This leaflet provides patients with information about what they can do to improve symptoms when they notice a flare, before contacting the rheumatology team.

What causes the pain?

Pain from arthritis can be due to a number of different processes. Joint inflammation results in swelling, redness, loss of movement and heat that can be felt on the skin overlying the joints. All these things can cause pain.

Drug free pain relief treatments

If a joint is painful, but not swollen

If you have been prescribed a splint this may provide some relief. Applying heat may also be useful. If the pain is widespread, a hot shower or bath can help. A bowl of hot water may be used for hands and feet.

If a joint is painful and swollen

A bowl of cold water with ice cubes may be used for the hands and feet. A bag of frozen peas wrapped in a pillow case or towel may be used as an ice pack to put on a painful joint. You can also buy a gel pack or use a damp towel that has been chilled in the fridge.

If a single joint is very painful, swollen and you have a fever then you should consult with a doctor.

Analgesia medicine (painkillers)

Analgesics are medicines that act specifically against pain, regardless of the cause. Paracetamol is a good pain relief medication, as is codeine. Cocodamol is a tablet that contains both paracetamol and codeine. Analgesics should work within an hour of taking them.

Maximum daily recommended doses:

- Paracetamol 1g four times a day
- Codeine 60mg four times a day

When taking co-codamol, be careful not to exceed the maximum daily dose of paracetamol.

Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs)

NSAIDs have an analgesic effect and also reduce inflammation. As inflammation can be a significant cause of pain in an arthritis flare, NSAIDs are often very effective. They can be used on their own, or in combination with paracetamol and/or codeine. NSAIDs work quickly, normally within a few hours.

If you have previously experienced severe indigestion, peptic ulcers, kidney problems, heart problems or take blood-thinning medication such as warfarin, NSAIDs should probably be avoided. If you have any questions, please contact your GP.

Emergency steroids

During a flare, if the maximum daily dose of the above analgesia is not controlling your symptoms, you may need a course of steroids.

Ask your GP to consider a short course of prednisolone 30 mg once daily for five days. Continue using analgesia during the steroid course.

Rescue medication: home steroids

If you have previously used oral steroids for a flare, and are confident in knowing when your arthritis is flaring, the rheumatology department may issue you with a short course of steroids to keep at home in case you have flares starting over the weekend or holiday periods.

Follow up

The rheumatology nurse helpline number is **01271 322359**.

Although messages will not be picked up out of normal working hours, all messages will be listened to and acted on within three working days.

If you receive information via email, you can log in to the British Society of Rheumatology (BSR) login page and report a flare, which will be seen by one of the rheumatology team and you will be contacted within 24 hours.

Further information

Arthritis Care: www.arthritiscare.org.uk or call 0207 3806500

The Psoriasis and Psoriatic Arthritis Association (PAPAA):
www.papaa.org or call 01923 672837

National Ankylosing Spondylitis Society (NASS): www.nass.co.uk or call 020 89489117

PALS

The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) ensures that the NHS listens to patients, relatives, carers and friends, answers questions and resolves concerns as quickly as possible. If you have a query or concern call 01271 314090 or email ndht.pals@nhs.net. You can also visit the PALS and Information Centre in person at North Devon District Hospital, Barnstaple.

Have your say

Northern Devon Healthcare NHS Trust aims to provide high quality services. However, please tell us when something could be improved. If you have a comment or compliment about a service or treatment, please raise your comments with a member of staff or the PALS team in the first instance.

'Care Opinion' comments forms are on all wards or online at www.careopinion.org.uk.

Northern Devon Healthcare NHS Trust
Raleigh Park, Barnstaple
Devon EX31 4JB
Tel. 01271 322577
www.northdevonhealth.nhs.uk

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