

# Get up and go

Arthritis can make mornings more challenging. **Eleanor Bird** presents some solutions to a typical morning – from getting out of bed to being ready to face the day

**M**ornings are definitely the worst by a long shot,' says Claire Lowe, 29, who has juvenile arthritis. 'With stiffness and pain, I'm like a very old woman. I have to wake up 45 minutes before I need to get up, so I can gradually begin to move.' Katie McAlarey, an occupational therapist (OT) based in Glasgow, comments: 'Early morning stiffness is particularly a feature of inflammatory arthritis, although some people with osteoarthritis feel bad too.'

Before John Crawford, 34, started taking anti-TNFs for ankylosing spondylitis (AS), he found every morning difficult. 'I put the alarm on at 6am to make sure I had time for painkillers to kick in,' he says. 'It was a good hour before I got relief, then I had to stand in a hot shower for 10 minutes to loosen up. Getting dressed was painful. It was hard on my wife as she had to help me as well as dealing with a two-year-old. By the time I'd got dressed, it was time to head for the bus stop.'

## Getting moving

'To get up, some people find rolling onto their side first makes it easier to get their legs over the bed's edge,' advises Katie. 'Then sit on the bed for a while before you stand. When you are ready, do simple exercises slowly. Stretching in bed first can help minimise stiffness.'

Steve Meek, 59, who has osteoarthritis and AS, agrees: 'I do 10 minutes of stretching in bed, then I sit on the bed, gradually stand up, then do a lot more stretches. If I

## MORNING ENERGY BOOSTERS

- Get up when the alarm goes – drifting off again can make you feel sluggish.
- Put some happy music on. Singing along could relieve tension.
- Watch your posture – muscles have to work harder if you slouch.
- Three-minute meditation – close your eyes and focus on breathing deeply. Let outside thoughts come and go, and re-focus on your breathing.
- Think positive. Have an up-beat personal mantra: 'It's going to be a good day'.

don't do them I walk like a penguin. To pull myself out of bed, I have a bed rail with an L-shaped handle – one end tucks under the mattress – it's extremely useful.'

Paula Nichols, 39, who has psoriatic arthritis, says: 'Before I get up, I curl into a ball to stretch my back. I do hand clenching and stretches. If my fingers don't work, I have breakfast first so I can dress later – by then I'm flexible enough to be able to get my underwear on – which is a good thing.' She learned relaxation therapy and yoga exercises from an OT. 'The gentle movements allow me to wake up my joints,' she says.

Katie says: 'People get frustrated that they can't get up quickly, but they need a strategy – like taking meds before they get up, having a hot drink and food before the effort of showering, or using the shower's heat to loosen up before exercising.' Avoid moving awkwardly; notice which movements and positions make you stiff and try alternatives that do not strain.

Claire always completes her

early morning routine with a walk to work: 'It gives me time to calm down if I've had a bad morning. I'm grumpy if I don't have the fresh air. And I feel like I've physically achieved something.' A physiotherapist can suggest exercises, while Arthritis Care has useful booklets on exercise and living with arthritis – call Arthritis Care's free helpline on 0808 800 4050 or visit [www.arthritiscare.org.uk/Booklets](http://www.arthritiscare.org.uk/Booklets)

### Washing and dressing

Steve finds 'having a hot shower onto my joints really helps with getting dressed'. After an OT's assessment of his home, social services helped convert the bathroom into a wet room: 'There's no shower enclosure, so I can move about easily and sit on a chair to shower.' Katie adds: 'Wall-fixed grab rails can steady you. If you have a shower over your bath, try sitting on a shower board that stretches across the bath – it helps swing your legs in, and you can stay seated during the shower.' Shower gels which hang up may be easier to

use than loose soap. To scrub hard-to-reach bits, long-handled brushes or towelling back-scrubbers are easy to find at chemists – the latter are also good for applying moisturisers. If you find it difficult reaching up to wash your hair, do it in the evening when you are less stiff.

Whilst dressing, Katie suggests sitting down: 'Don't balance on one leg as your balance may be worse in the morning.' Claire says: 'I fasten my bra at the front then swivel it round, as I can't do it up at the back. I put on socks slowly – I can't lift my leg straight up, so I use anything I can find to pull them up.' Steve has a gadget to do just that.

There are many gadgets to help you shower and dress. Dressing sticks, hooked at one end and rounded at the other can help pull clothes up and down ➔ p18

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and deal with zips, laces and fastenings. If you cannot bend at the hip, a pick-up stick is useful. A shoe horn reduces bending distance and eases sore feet into shoes.

Choose clothes for easy dressing. 'I don't have anything which goes over my head, everything buttons up,' says Steve. Paula, conversely, has nothing with buttons. 'They're no good if my fingers are stiff. I have T-shirts I can pull on.'

For information on aids, talk to an OT through your doctor or rheumatology department, or contact Arthritis Care's helpline. The Disabled Living Foundation lists equipment suppliers – [www.dlf.org.uk](http://www.dlf.org.uk) or helpline: 0845 130 9177.

## Planning and pacing

'I've learned that everything should be sorted the night before,' Claire reports. 'I hang my clothes ready. I put everything at waist height so I don't need to bend. I set out my coffee ready, with powdered milk so



### Allow yourself time in the morning to do tasks slowly

challenge working out where to save effort, such as having everything within easy reach so you don't need to make two trips. Try new things one at a time.'

Writing a morning ritual list can help you analyse activity and pace yourself. If getting out of the house seems like a huge mountain, think of the process in separate stages without worrying ahead. Got out of bed? You've reached base camp one. Now try the next stage.

Prepare the evening before: for example, pack the children's lunchboxes and delegate small chores – children can line up their shoes, or pack school bags. Pool cars for school runs, so you have free days. Ask your employer about flexible working – starting at 9.30am instead of 9am, or working at home once a week.

If you don't work, allow yourself to relax: 'We have breakfast whenever it suits,' Steve comments. 'We don't have to rush. The main thing is a cup of tea for fuelling the joints.' Plan your breakfast for ease – Paula always buys screw-topped milk not cartons, so she can use a jar-opener, for example.

Ensure your bedroom is as comfortable as possible. As Katie says: 'You may need to alter the sleeping position you've always had.' Paula finds a bad night 'doesn't affect my symptoms but does affect my mood and how I cope with things in the morning. It makes me notice pain a lot more. If I am too cold, my hands seize up, but too hot and they swell, so I keep the house at an ambient temperature of 18°C.' Put heating on a timer, so it's warm before you rise.

Acceptance of necessary changes can be as important as the changes themselves. If you have to get up extra early, enjoy the stillness and time to yourself, and greet the day rather than fighting it. Paula asserts: 'If I'm up early, I get that sense of achievement. You can take your time and relax in between tasks. I used to be so rushed when I got up later.'

## Ask for help

Don't be afraid to ask for – or accept – help from friends, family and health professionals. John found this support invaluable: 'My neighbours gave me a lift in the morning if they could see I was stooped in pain. My wife and her family are a massive support locally, as mine are far away,' he says. 'When I am low, I speak to my aunt who has multiple sclerosis – she doesn't let anything get to her. She's an inspiration.' And we all need a little inspiration in the mornings. **an**



### Stretching in bed and sitting on the bed for a while can help to minimise morning stiffness

I don't have to bend to the fridge. It takes practice, but the stress you get when you're rushing doesn't do you any good.'

Katie emphasises the importance of being prepared. 'Planning and pacing are vital. They reduce stress and save energy. We do regular tasks so automatically, it can be a