Resource

Getting through the festive period when you have RA

Blog by Victoria Butler

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“It’s the most wonderful time of the year” as the song would have us believe. It can also be an exhausting, expensive and stressful time. Add to this living with an unpredictable health condition, like rheumatoid arthritis and you may struggle ‘to be jolly’ this season.

Even if you and your family don’t celebrate Christmas, you may still be affected by an increased number of social commitments, or by joining in other family’s festivities.

The way you navigate the festive period may be different to how it was before your diagnosis, but with the right changes, you can still ‘have a holly, jolly Christmas’.

Food

It can be harder to control the food we eat during the festive season, with set menus, meals at other people’s houses and endless snacks being passed round or bought for us. This may make keeping to your usual diet seemingly impossible.

This can be especially hard for people with RA, who may find that certain foods make their symptoms worse. Think about how you can make these occasions work for you. Could you bring your own snack to a party? If a set menu doesn’t work for you, could you eat at home, then join people for drinks after the meal? Could you substitute some parts of the Christmas dinner for something your body tolerates better?

For more information on Diet and RA see our diet article.

If you are usually responsible for cooking Christmas dinner, but find it too much for your joints, see if someone can either help or take on this responsibility. Maybe you could cook the meal together, as a new family tradition. If you play host to relatives, perhaps they could all cook and bring something. You may just hit upon a tradition that everyone prefers. Our blog article on tips for hosting Christmas dinner may help.

For advice on the risks associated with the bacteria ‘listeria’, found in smoked and cured fish, click here.

Drinking alcohol

Depending on which medication you are on, you may be advised to be cautious about how much alcohol you drink, especially in a single evening. Most medicines pass through your liver, as does alcohol, meaning your liver has to work twice as hard.

If you like to drink alcohol with friends, making a close friend aware in advance of the importance of you not drinking too much can help you to avoid awkward conversations or peer pressure from a larger group. Make sure you are aware of the number of units you are drinking. Avoid having your glass ‘topped up’, as this can make it hard for you to know how much you have had. You may also find that a non-alcoholic alternative works well for you.

For more information, see our article on alcohol and RA.

Social calendar

Social activities can be hard to plan for when you have a variable health condition, as you don't know how you will feel from one day to the next. Having a flare up might mean you need to cancel at short notice and fatigue can make these events draining. Where you can, spread these occasions out and allow for a more relaxing day the next day.

You may find our information on managing flares and fatigue helpful.

Finances

If finances are stretched, shop second hand, do homemade gifts. See if someone you buy for would be happy not to do gifts anymore or set a budget. If you buy for a lot of family members, maybe suggest setting up Secret Santa instead, where you each only buy for one person and work to a budget.

Many people with RA struggle to work or have reduced hours and people with a disability will often have extra costs. If you've not looked into benefits that you might be entitled to, our information on benefits will give you a good starting point.

Other tips

- Be open with people who you know will understand: Your medication may mean that you can't drink much alcohol, a flare may mean that you have to cancel plans at short notice. Forewarn friends and family who you know will understand and if needed, back you up.
- Accept help offered and ask for help when needed: We can all be guilty of people-pleasing and of trying to take on too much, and many are more comfortable giving help than receiving it. Accepting that we need help can be tough, while helping someone else can make us feel good. Try to remember that someone helping you will likely also feel good to be able to help you.
- Keep warm: Many people with RA find their pain feels worse in the cold. Hand warmers, hot water bottles and heat-up wheat packs can ease painful joints when you come in from the cold.
- Embrace helpful technology: Whether it's a gadget for your kitchen or a phone app that helps you to manage your budget, shopping or 'to-do' lists, there is a lot of technology out there that can make your life a lot easier. Our blog on tech stocking fillers for people with RA may give you some ideas.
- Keep the traditions that work for you. Change the ones that don't: Every family has their own traditions. Some are cultural, some passed down through families and some we make for ourselves. Good traditions can make this time of year feel special. Bad traditions feel like an obligation that we dread. Think about your traditions and how you feel about them. If a tradition isn't working for you, think about ways that it could be changed, replaced or removed. Discuss this with your family. They may share your dread!

With all this in mind, let's make this the year that Christmas will be a little different, but no less magical!