How to Combat Morning Lupus Stiffness

by ELENA ANCIRO

Dealing With Lupus Stiffness in the Morning

When I was experiencing frequent morning lupus stiffness, I would spend more than half an hour trying to will my body out of bed. I would ignore my morning aches and rush into my day, arriving late to commitments in a blur of pain.

Several years passed before I learned combating morning stiffness is a proactive battle that happens throughout the day, not just in the morning. There are several ways you can take a preventative stance on morning stiffness, from the foods you eat, the way you sleep, to the items you place on your nightstand.

Right Before Sleep

If you know you have a busy week ahead or you've been feeling more joint pain than usual, set your morning alarm 45 minutes to an hour earlier. In order to manage your morning stiffness, you need dedicated, unrushed time to deal with and assess how your body is feeling.

Protect Your Sleep

Having a full night of sleep is especially important for someone with lupus. The less sleep we get, the more likely symptoms like morning stiffness will worsen.

The emergence of cell phones and other electronic devices have taken a toll on our sleep patterns. Many people keep their phones by their bed and are disturbed by late night email notifications or early texts and phone calls.

Protect your sleep by turning on your phone's "do not disturb" option or turn it off completely as part of your evening ritual.

Cease all screen time at least an hour before you go to bed. The lighting from your computer, tablet or cell phone tricks your brain into thinking its daytime, making it more difficult to fall asleep.

Assess Your Nest

People living with lupus spend a considerable amount of time in bed, so our "nests" should be treated as a special place of healing and comfort. Before you get into bed, ask yourself:

- Is it warm enough? Do I need more blankets?
- How old is my mattress? Is my bed supporting my body properly?
- Is my pillow supporting my neck?
- Do I need pain medication and a glass of water by my bed just in case I need it in the morning?
- Do I need a support beside my bed to hold on to in the morning?

Keeping your body warm and supported and thinking proactively about what you need around your bed are just some of the ways you can turn your bed into your own personalized healing haven. This will help minimize the stress and discomfort that come with morning stiffness.

During Sleep

The position we sleep in can cause body pain and directly affect how many hours of sleep we get. Making a conscious effort to sleep in a healthy position can make a huge difference in the amount of pain we feel in the morning.

The sleeping positions to aim for are on your back and on your side. The fetal position (knees pulled high and chin tucked into chest) is less desirable, as it can aggravate inflamed joints.

If you can, avoid sleeping on your stomach. This position puts the most pressure on your muscles and joints, which will only intensify the lupus-related stiffness you already experience.

In the Morning

I started doing restorative yoga during an intense flare up of joint inflammation. Initially, I was scared to move any part of my body, given how much distress I was in, but I was amazed at how much these simple poses helped me manage my pain.

The next time I was confronted with morning lupus stiffness, I started doing my favorite poses in bed instead of on my yoga mat. Doing stretches in bed is a great way to slowly wake up your body and start to release the tension in your joints.

Here are my top three restorative bed stretches:

- **Reclining Bound Angle Pose —** Arms out to the side, bend your knees, let your knees fall open into a diamond shape, with your feet facing each other. Use pillows or pile up your blanket underneath each knee, so your knees are resting comfortably on the support.
- **Chest Hugger —** Hug your knees to your chest, hold, and/or rock from side to side. You can also pull each knee into your chest one at a time.
- **Supine Spinal Twist —** Arms out in a t-shape, bend your right knee, cross your right knee over to the part of the bed on the left side of your body, hips should be stacked on the each other. Turn your head to the right and gaze at your fingers. Repeat on the other side.

Warm Up and Relax

By setting your alarm earlier, you can take the time to soothe your joints with a hot shower or bath. Remember, dealing with physical pain requires a lot of mental energy — a few minutes relaxing in the tub can give you the extra boost you need to take on the next task of the day.

During the Day

As much as possible, plan your day according to how you are feeling. Morning lupus stiffness often results from pushing our limits and doing too much in one day — be realistic and modify if necessary!

Get Moving

Excess weight and a sedentary lifestyle can intensify joint inflammation, so although exercise during painful flare ups may seem counter-intuitive, it’s the key to combatting joint stiffness. Aim to do a gentle form of exercise 30 minutes a day — short walks outside or at the mall are great ways to start!

Focus on Anti-Inflammatory Foods

Our kitchen fridge can also be our in-house pharmacy, especially if we target foods that are inflammation annihilators. Here are five anti-inflammatory super foods that can help you minimize the occurrence of morning stiffness:

- Green leafy vegetables (spinach, kale, romaine lettuce, etc.)
- Bok choy
- Celery
- Beets
- Broccoli

By taking proactive steps, we can combat the stress, frustration and pain that comes with morning lupus stiffness. The small things we do everyday can help us take back our mornings and set the tone for happier and healthier days!