



Thuridur



**Thuridur Helgadóttir  
Iceland**

My name is Thuridur and I live in Borgarnes, a small village which is a one hour drive from Reykjavik on the west coast of Iceland.

I am 49 years old and work as a social and healthcare assistant. I read about the Stene Prize in the Icelandic League Against Rheumatism's magazine.

As I love writing this was an exciting challenge and I decided to take part. As I wrote in my essay, I love hiking and enjoying nature in Iceland's beautiful landscapes. I have already climbed to the top of Hafnarfjall, a mountain of 844 meters high, more than 60 times and there is always something new to discover.

# My body, my responsibility

**Three years ago I started exercising, mainly going jogging with people from the runners' site. I took up jogging with enthusiasm and positivity and followed a routine devised for me by an established site member. But things didn't turn out quite as I'd expected.**

Despite my good intentions I wasn't that good at it and I ended up straining some of the muscles in my feet. The worst pain though was in my pelvic area, which is the weakest part of my body. "Pelvic wear-and-tear" – that's how my doctor described what was to become my travelling companion for life. Every piece of imaging equipment available confirmed the diagnosis.

I have always been keen on exercise, mainly going to organised gym classes, so I couldn't really be accused of being a quitter. Of course, the jogging idea was really just a fantasy, because my body wasn't actually able to support me. I may also have been in denial about my limitations, which is something most people struggling with this condition can probably relate to.

If I were to try and give you a rough idea of what it feels like on the occasions when this companion of mine plays up, giving me arthritic symptoms, I would say that it is similar to the pelvic dislocation you can experience during pregnancy. The only difference is that I can't break free from my prison after the nine months are up. The disease is in my pelvis and, when I put my body under strain, the pain extends to all my pelvic joints, lower back and groin. I get swelling and knots in my thigh muscles, which feels a bit like driving along the roads in the Icelandic countryside which are ridden with potholes.

**Despite this sob story I have just given you, I am still able to do a lot of things.** Instead of jogging, I now use my trainers to go hiking, rather than just putting them away on a shelf. This is an acceptable solution because I really enjoy hiking on gravelly soil and heathland, and even on hills. However, this is still a form of weight bearing exercise that strains all my joints, so my willpower often caves in because of my reduced levels of stamina. On good days, I may walk for three to five kilometres at a stretch, but on bad days I'll just go round the block. The most exercise I can take on in a year is one or two longish walks in the summer with some good friends of mine. These walks are good for my mental health and, after

all, somebody has to bring up the rear. I find that these walks seem to take away all my pain. Or maybe not, as they do take their toll; the strain injuries, pain and physical fatigue I get after long walks may remain with me for up to a week or a fortnight and, needless to say, I to have to take plenty of rest afterwards.

The best time for me to go for a walk is in the afternoon, if I can summon up the energy. Good trainers are essential and I sometimes use poles in order to lighten the load on my hips. Of course, warm clothes and/or a waterproof or windproof jacket may be necessary, depending on the weather, and so may spikes when it's slippery outside. But that's not exactly rocket science.

Swimming, of course, is the best thing for arthritis, as the water supports your weight and eases the load on your joints and ligaments. That's why I feel virtually no fatigue after going for a swim. I go swimming twice a week, for an hour at a time, and I do one and a half to two kilometres. Sometimes, my battery runs down halfway through the exercise session and I just have to accept that. We all have off days. Five or six years ago all I was able to do was breaststroke, but with endless practice, good teaching and tenacity I have managed to master all the other strokes as well. Flippers, floats, goggles and



a swimming cap all help me relieve the pain of my arthritis.

One of my favourite forms of exercise is cycling in the country and, of course, going for short bike rides in town. This is a tough form of exercise, which can exhaust you and puts a heavy strain on your entire body. When I get off my bicycle, the pain doesn't let up until about an hour or so later. I just need to make sure the distance, time and strain are reasonable. During the winter, I don't go cycling if it is cold and slippery outside. Instead, I use an indoor spinning bike once a week. Sometimes it's alright, but sometimes it isn't and it hurts the whole time. I can do far less than the others in the group, but that also means that I can pace myself in a way that suits me. I can't do without certain items of gear when I go cycling, including thick cycling shorts with a padded seat and a thick gel-padded saddle, because cycling can be hard on the joints in your groin. When I go cycling outdoors, protective clothing for my neck, shoulders and all my joints is essential.

## **"Swimming, of course, is the best thing for arthritis."**

Last winter, I saw an advertisement for zumba classes. Since I love dancing and was in fairly good condition at the time after doing all sorts of pelvic floor exercises with my physiotherapist, I decided to

give it a try. I had not been able to do general exercise of any kind for a long time. I did zumba twice a week; I was almost the oldest in the group, but I managed alright, given all my limitations. Even then, I obviously felt the strain in my groin and hip area and, when I came home, the only thing I could do was have a shower, lie down and get some rest. Sometimes, I needed extra painkillers, but it was definitely worthwhile taking them. I ended up doing various forms of exercise to fun music and in good company. To be on the safe side, I wore a good pair of trainers and a belt to support my lower back.

Many people thought that I might be taking this exercise thing too far. I did actually hear some of them say "You? Going up hills and hiking out in the wilds? Huh, you can't possibly have arthritis, can you?" That was a really prejudiced comment, as if they could possibly know what it's like having arthritis!

Today, I do an average of 30 to 40 minutes exercise a day. I put that down to what I said before, which is that keeping fit comes with certain limitations when you suffer from the conditions I do. It is only just over half of what I was able to do five years ago.

After I have finished my fitness routine, I do 10 to 20 minutes stretching, focusing on the muscle group that has taken the heaviest strain and on my weakest areas. Stretching, exercises, massage and other treatments and routines prescribed by my physiotherapist

are all part of my training regime, as are hot tubs, water massage and relaxation. All of this takes a lot of time and tries my patience, but I still think every moment is worth the money. If, the day after exercising, I can wake up with only relatively little pain, then I am ready to do the same things all over again.

I've worked in geriatric care for many years and am always reading about ways to improve health and physical fitness. On the back of all that, I've learned that there are various tools and tips which can improve my wellbeing, as well as that of other people. I am lucky, in that I have a good doctor, physiotherapist and occupational therapist who I can turn to when my symptoms are getting the better of me. I have found the work they have done with me and their encouragement invaluable.

I still think my willpower has to be the number one factor behind my success; my sense of personal responsibility and self-esteem are what help me get through my day-to-day exercise routine, I'm grateful for what I have and what I can do, and I'm trying as hard as I can to use it to my advantage.

Although I am aware of the side effects that these drugs can have, I have decided to take anti-inflammatories regularly, and have also needed injections for my arthritis to get rid of the swelling and joint pain. The combination of these treatments enables me to be more active in my work, my studies and when exercising. The pleasant fatigue that I get after these different

activities helps me sleep well every night. Like other people with arthritis, I too have had bad days when no drugs or treatments seem to work, and even days when I have been unable to do any work. I remember having days when I would mope around the house, miserable, depressed and gloomy, when I would lock the door and crawl into bed like a wounded animal. These are memories I'd rather forget. Running a marathon, breaking sports records or spending my whole day in the swimming pool will probably not be included in my list of accomplishments; that's just the way it is. And I know for sure that at some point I will have to stop going out for challenging walks and hikes. I've had to pay dearly to be able to do them and it will be difficult for me to continue. Eventually I will simply have to make do with looking at the path up the mountain slopes that I can see from my window and fantasising about the view and the freedom that climbing up there and meditating can give you.

"See the top, that's where I climbed".\* My closing words are from the poem "Mountain Walks" by Tómas Guðmundsson

## **"I still think my willpower has to be the number one factor behind my success."**