Osteoarthritis of the hand and wrist

arthritis-uk.org



Arthritis UK

We are Arthritis UK

We're the 10 million adults, young people and children living with arthritis. We're the carers, researchers and healthcare professionals. The families and the friends. All united by one powerful vision: a future free from arthritis. So that one day, no one will have to live with the physical, emotional and practical challenges that arthritis brings.

There are many different types of arthritis. And we understand that every day is different. What's more, what works for one person may not help another. That's why our trusted information blends the latest research and expert advice with a range of lived experiences. In this way, we aim to give you everything you need to know about your condition, the treatments available and the many options you can try, so that you can make better-informed choices to suit your needs.

We're always happy to hear from you whether it's with feedback on our information, to share your story, or just to find out more about the work of Arthritis UK. **Contact us at healthinfo@arthritis-uk.org**

Contents

What is osteoarthritis?	4
Which joints in the hand are affected?	5
How will it affect me?	6
How is hand osteoarthritis diagnosed?	8
Managing arthritis of the hand and wrist	9
Exercises for osteoarthritis of the hand and wrist	16
Discover our support services	21
Thank you	22
Support our work	23



What is osteoarthritis?

Osteoarthritis is the most common form of arthritis, and the hand and wrist joints are often affected. It can affect anyone but is most common in women over the age of 50.

Osteoarthritis develops when the joint's ability to repair itself becomes less effective. This can lead to changes that make the joint sensitive and painful. This doesn't necessarily mean that your condition will keep getting worse. Keeping active will help to keep your joints healthy. A joint is a part of the body where 2 or more bones meet. The ends of the bones are covered in a smooth and slippery tissue, known as cartilage. This allows the bones to move smoothly against each other.

Osteoarthritis can make the cartilage in your joints become thinner and rougher. This means that the joints may not move as smoothly, and they might feel painful and stiff. Bony spurs called osteophytes may form and this can also affect the way the bones move against each other. In your finger joints these osteophytes may be visible as firm, knobbly swellings. These are sometimes referred to as Heberden's nodes or Bouchard's nodes depending on which joints are affected.

We don't always know exactly why someone develops osteoarthritis, but we do know it isn't simply 'wear and tear'. Several factors can play a part, including:

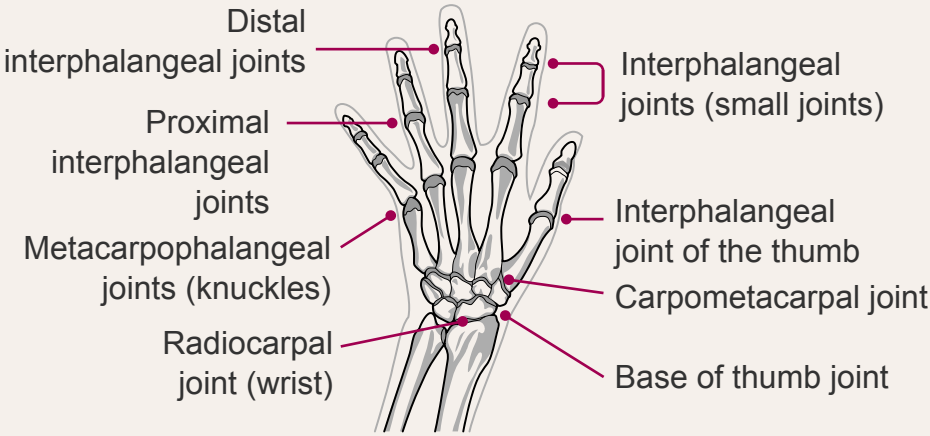
- being female
- the genes you inherit from your parents
- previous injuries, especially repeated or severe injuries
- carrying out repetitive tasks over a long period of time.



For more information on osteoarthritis and how it's diagnosed, see the Arthritis UK booklet **Osteoarthritis**.

Which joints in the hand are affected?

Figure 1. Joints of the hand and wrist



The index and middle fingers and the thumb are the parts of the hand most commonly affected by osteoarthritis. Many people find that the hand they use most is affected more than the other.

When the fingers are affected, it may be in the joints closest to your fingernails or in the mid-finger joints. It's less common to have osteoarthritis in the large knuckle joints, where your fingers join your hand.

The joint at the base of the thumb can also be affected by osteoarthritis. And occasionally, your wrist joint may be affected.

How will it affect me?

The symptoms of hand osteoarthritis vary between different people and over time. This may depend on what you're doing, but sometimes there's no obvious reason.

If your joints are inflamed then they're likely to look swollen and red and to feel warm and tender to the touch. You're likely to have pain, especially when using your hands but sometimes even while resting.

Swelling can also cause the soft tissues around a joint to stretch, which can make your hands feel weak or unstable.

As we use our hands a lot in daily life, pain, stiffness or poor grip strength can cause problems with a wide variety of tasks and activities including:

- opening jars and cans
- holding a pen or cutlery
- doing up buttons or zips
- handling money
- shaving, brushing your teeth, or drying yourself after a bath or shower.

Hand osteoarthritis sometimes 'burns out' after a time. It may be painful for a few years and then may improve, especially if only the small finger joints are affected. Any firm, knobbly swellings or nodes that have developed will remain though. And the range of movement in your joints doesn't always improve even when the pain does.

Sometimes the weather, especially cold weather, can make your symptoms feel worse.

People who develop knobbly swellings or nodes at the finger joints tend to have an increased risk of developing osteoarthritis of the knee as well. However, many people with hand osteoarthritis will never develop it in any other joints.

A condition called carpal tunnel syndrome can sometimes develop as a result of osteoarthritis of the wrist. This is where a nerve that runs into the hand is squeezed by swelling in the wrist joint or in the tendons next to the nerve. This can cause weakness, numbness, or pins and needles in the hand. It can also cause pain, especially at night. If you have these symptoms regularly you should see your GP.



How is hand osteoarthritis diagnosed?

It's often possible for your doctor to diagnose osteoarthritis of the hand from your symptoms and a simple examination, without any need for tests.

Although X-rays will show changes in the shape or structure of the joint, they're often not needed to confirm the diagnosis. Blood tests can sometimes be helpful but usually only if there's doubt about whether it's osteoarthritis or another type of arthritis.

Sometimes gout can affect the hands and this can look very much like osteoarthritis. If your doctor thinks it may be gout then they'll want to check your urate levels through a blood test. Urate is a waste product which is normally flushed out of the body through the kidneys. But if it builds up it can form crystals in the joints, leading to severe pain and swelling.

It's less common for the joints where your fingers meet your hand to be affected by osteoarthritis, so if you have pain and swelling in these joints your doctor may ask for blood tests to check for rheumatoid arthritis.

Psoriatic arthritis can also affect the hands and may look similar to osteoarthritis. There are no blood tests at present for psoriatic arthritis, but this type of arthritis is linked to the skin condition psoriasis. Your doctor may therefore ask if you or anyone in your family has a history of skin problems.



For further information, see Arthritis UK booklets: **Gout, Rheumatoid arthritis, Psoriatic arthritis**.

Managing arthritis of the hand and wrist

There's no cure for osteoarthritis, but there are treatments and things that you can do yourself to ease your symptoms and make a difference to how the condition affects you.

Exercise

Joints need to be exercised regularly to keep them healthy. Exercise can help to ease stiffness and improve your grip strength. Try to keep moving your hand joints as normally as possible and to do some specific hand exercises.

A physiotherapist, occupational therapist or hand therapist will be able to suggest exercises for you, but we've included a few suggestions at the end of this booklet. These should help to maintain strength and range of movement in your joints, which should make everyday tasks easier to manage.

Activities that put a lot of strain on your hand joints may need to be adapted. For yoga or Pilates movements where a lot of your body weight is supported on your hands, you may need to take the weight through your forearms instead.

If you are using weights to exercise, then you may need to use hand straps or use lighter weights and increase the repetitions. A physiotherapist or hand therapist will be able to help if you're unsure how best to adapt an activity.

Some people find that a soft squeezy 'stress ball' helps to ease discomfort in the hands.

Weight management and diet



Although the link between your weight and osteoarthritis of the hands may not be obvious, research has shown that being overweight can increase inflammation in the body and may also increase pain. So it makes sense to try to maintain, or achieve, a healthy weight.

If you need to lose some weight, the best way is to follow a healthy, balanced diet and combine it with some exercise. Try to cut down on fatty and sugary foods and include plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables in your diet.

Reducing the strain on your hands and wrists

If you have osteoarthritis in your hands or wrists, it's worth thinking about how you use them and how you might use them differently to reduce the strain on the joints.

It may be helpful to see an occupational therapist or hand therapist for advice. But many people find their own ways of doing things. You could try:

- using gadgets such as electric tin openers or tools with softer, chunkier handles that don't need such a tight grip
- using a backpack or trolley to avoid carrying heavy bags in your hands
- taking more frequent breaks from tasks that put more strain on your joints, or switching between harder and easier jobs

- using both hands where possible instead of one
- having taps or door handles changed for those that are easier to use
- looking for easy-to-handle fastenings when buying clothes or shoes.



You can find more tips on reducing the strain on your joints in our booklets **Gadgets and equipment for your home** and **Looking after your joints when you have arthritis**.

Pain relief

Several things can help relieve symptoms of pain and inflammation in the hands.

Heat and cold

Applying warmth to painful joints often helps to ease pain. Just putting your hands in warm water can help, especially if they tend to feel stiff in the morning.

A paraffin wax bath can also ease pain and stiffness. The wax is heated in a container until it's soft and you dip your hands into the wax. Wax baths are used mainly in hospitals, although they are available to buy.

Either way, combining warmth with some hand exercises will give the best results.

Some people find using an ice pack more effective, especially if the joints are swollen. When applying packs to your skin, make sure you wrap them in a cloth and don't put them on your bare skin. You can apply ice for 20 to 30 minutes at a time every few hours.



Splints and supports

Several types of splints are available. It's best not to use a splint all the time, as this could increase joint stiffness and weaken your hands. You should also do some gentle hand exercises when you take the splint off.

The main types of splint are:

- **resting splints** – which keep your wrist and hand still and in the right position while you're resting
- **working splints** – which are used mainly to support the wrist while you're using your hands. There are different types which provide either light support for everyday tasks or firmer support for more strenuous activities. There are also working splints to support the joint at the base of the thumb.

A splint can be helpful if you have osteoarthritis at the base of your thumb, where it joins your hand. Although you may not notice the benefit straight away, wearing a custom-made thumb splint that maintains your thumb span while you sleep may help with pain and movement in the longer term.

You can buy splints and supports from pharmacies, mobility equipment suppliers and online. If you're not sure what type of splint would be best for you, an occupational therapist or hand therapist will be able to offer advice or may even have a splint made up to suit your particular needs.

Pain relief medicines

Pain relief medicines can ease the symptoms of osteoarthritis, but they won't affect the condition itself. You'll have the best results if you use them to help you keep active, and also follow the above tips to reduce the strain on your hands.

Some of the pain relief treatments you can try include:

- **NSAID creams and gels:** Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) are available as gels or creams and as tablets or capsules. NSAID gels and creams, applied directly to the hands, can be particularly helpful and it's usually recommended that you try these first.

  Gels containing ibuprofen or diclofenac are widely available from pharmacies and supermarkets but others, such as ketoprofen, are available on prescription.

- **Capsaicin cream:** This often helps when other pain-relieving creams or gels haven't. It's made from a substance found in chilli peppers and is available in different strengths, either to buy or on prescription. Availability may vary.

- **NSAID tablets:** A short course of NSAID tablets, such as ibuprofen, can help reduce pain, inflammation and swelling. Ibuprofen is widely available at pharmacies and supermarkets. It's best to check with a pharmacist if it's suitable for you.

  If you need to take it for more than a couple of weeks, check with your doctor as you may need other tablets to protect your stomach from side effects. Higher doses of ibuprofen and other NSAID tablets are available on prescription.

- **Painkillers:** Some people find simple pain relief medicines such as paracetamol help, but they won't usually be prescribed on the NHS.

Stronger pain relief medicines such as co-codamol, codeine and tramadol are available but are usually only prescribed for short-term use because there is limited evidence for their effectiveness and they usually carry a greater risk of side effects.

- **Steroid injections:** A steroid injection isn't recommended as a routine treatment or first option. But it may be offered occasionally if you have osteoarthritis of the thumb or the middle joints of the fingers, especially if there's a lot of inflammation and other treatments haven't helped.

  Steroid injections tend to have a short-lived effect and cannot be repeated frequently because research shows the effects last for a shorter time with each injection.

If you're taking over-the-counter medicines, make sure you take them as directed on the packet or information leaflet. Make sure whoever is treating you knows all the medications you're taking.



For further information, see Arthritis UK booklets: **Painkillers and NSAIDs, Steroid injections, Osteoarthritis**.

Surgery

Most people with osteoarthritis won't need surgery, but there are surgical options if other treatments aren't helping. These include:

- **Trapeziectomy** – This involves removing of bone at the base of the thumb. The operation can help relieve pain and maintain grip strength. This operation sometimes includes reconstruction of the thumb ligaments.

- **Joint fusion** – Very painful finger or thumb joints can be permanently fixed in a slightly bent position. This is mostly done for the smallest joints near the tips of the fingers or for the knuckle of the index finger, so it shouldn't affect your ability to grip things.
- **Synovectomy** – This is where the inflamed lining of the joint capsule, called the synovium, is removed.
- **Joint replacement** – This operation can be done for the middle and larger joints of the hand. The joint at the base of the thumb can also be replaced, but this is a newer procedure and research is still assessing how the results compare with trapeziectomy.

  Wrist joint replacement isn't yet common – it can help improve movement at the wrist, but the movement may not be as good as before your arthritis started.
- **Carpal tunnel release** – This is sometimes needed to relieve pressure on the nerve.

For further information on the main types of surgery, check out our website: **arthritis-uk.short.gy/hand-and-wrist-surgery**



Exercises for osteoarthritis of the hand and wrist

The following exercises are designed to keep the hand and wrist flexible.

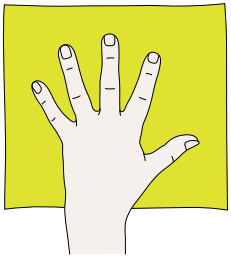
Try to do them regularly, every day if you can. Start off gently and gradually increase the amount you do. A bit of discomfort doesn't mean you're doing yourself any harm, but seek advice if you have severe pain during or after exercise, or if the pain doesn't ease in a few days.

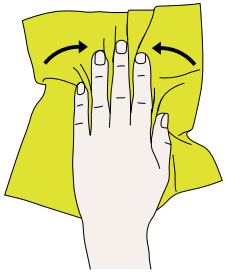
Finger strengthening

Begin with the palm of your hand on a tissue or towel on a table, fingers apart.

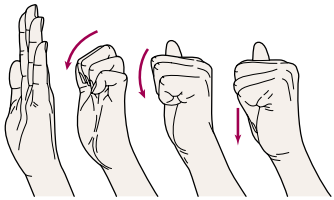
Pull your fingers together by pressing your hand down and bunching up the towel between your fingers. Repeat.

You can also do this without using a towel or tissue, simply by pressing down on the table and squeezing your fingers together and then stretching them apart.





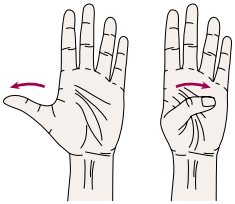
Finger stretching



Start with your fingers extended straight out.

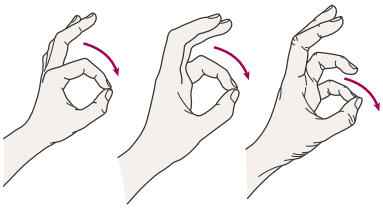
- Make a hook fist – return to a straight hand.
- Make a full fist – return to a straight hand.
- Make a straight fist – return to a straight hand.

Thumb stretch



Hold your hand out in front of you, as if you're saying stop. Begin with your thumb stretched outward. Move the thumb across your palm and then back to the starting position.

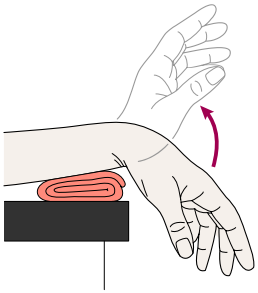
Making O shapes



With your elbow resting on a table, put your thumb against the tip of your forefinger. Make sure your thumb joints are slightly bent to form an O shape. Then spread your fingers and thumb wide and repeat with the other fingers.

Repeat 4 times to start with, gradually building up to 15 times in total.

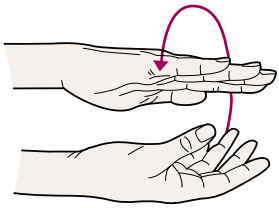
Hand lift



Place your forearm on a flat surface, like a table, with your hand hanging over the edge, palm facing down. A rolled-up towel under your wrist might help for comfort.

Keeping your fingers relaxed, move your hand upward until you feel a gentle stretch, then return to the starting position.

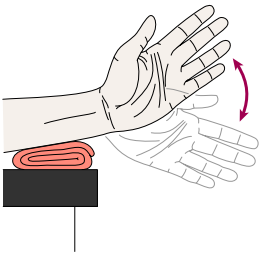
Wrist twist



Bend your elbow to 90 degrees with your palm facing down.

Rotate your forearm, so that your palm faces up and then down. You can do this sitting or standing.

Hand wave



Support your forearm on a table on a rolled-up towel for padding, or on your knee, thumb facing upward.

Move your wrist up and down through its full range of motion as if you're waving.



Notes

Discover our support services

You don't need to face arthritis alone. Get the information, advice and support that you need.



Call our free helpline:
0800 5200 520



Connect with our online community, go to:
community.arthritis-uk.org



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arthritis-uk.org/ask-AVA-our-virtual-assistant



Track your symptoms with our easy app, go to:
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Thank you!

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We would also like to give a special thank you to the people who shared their opinions and thoughts on the booklet. Your contributions make sure the information we provide is relevant and suitable for everyone.



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