

Protect Your Hands – Joint Care Methods Reduce Arthritic Damage and Pain

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The many small bones that make up the hand move in multiple directions, allowing us to complete very fine activities such as picking up a pin. When two or more bones meet they form a joint, which allows a certain range of movement. The joint has a lining of cartilage that acts as a shock absorber to keep the bone ends from bumping or rubbing against each other.

What is Arthritis?

Arthritis occurs when the cartilage lining of the joints is damaged. The damage can result from trauma, wear and tear, or disease. The most common forms of arthritis are osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis. Osteoarthritis, the most common, can affect multiple joints in the hand, thumb, and wrist. The most commonly involved joints in the hand are the tip and middle joints of the fingers and the base of the thumb. When arthritis damages the cartilage movement may become painful and the joints become swollen and stiff.

When arthritic joints are strained by over stretching, applying a load that's too heavy, or doing too much repetition of a task, pain may increase and the joints may become swollen and more damaged. Joint protection techniques help prevent overstraining joints and also may reduce further damage to the joints, therefore decreasing arthritis hand pain.

Protecting Your Hand Joints

The basic principles of joint protection include the following: maintaining good range of movement in the joints, using the largest and strongest joints to accomplish tasks, balancing working and resting of the joints, learning to listen to and respect pain, and avoiding prolonged tight grasping of the fingers. Stiffness in the fingers and thumb occurs gradually with arthritis.

Maintaining good range of motion in the joints of the hand can prevent strain caused by daily tasks. To accomplish this move your finger and thumb joints slowly through a full and pain-free range of movement several times daily, especially before you complete tasks that require the use of your hands.

When completing lifting, pushing, or pulling activities always use the largest and strongest joints to accomplish the task. For example, when lifting a plastic grocery bag instead of grasping it with your fingers just slip your hand and wrist through the handles on the bag and slide the handles over your forearm to lift and carry the bag this way.

When using your hands for repetitive tasks take frequent rest breaks and move the joints through gentle pain-free range of motion. By taking frequent rest breaks the joints do not become as swollen and the muscles do not become as fatigued, thereby reducing pain and joint damage.

Respect Your Pain

The old axiom “no pain, no gain” does not hold true when dealing with arthritis of the hand. Learning to listen to, understand, and respect your pain will help you avoid further damage to your joints. When we complete daily tasks it is not uncommon to experience some mild discomfort in various parts of the hand. Generally this discomfort will go away within a few minutes after discontinuing the task. If an activity causes specific joint pain that lasts an hour or more the arthritic joint likely is being overstrained, which may cause swelling. Swollen joints are more likely to become damaged further. In the future simply avoid doing the task that caused the prolonged pain or think of ways to modify the task to reduce the strain on the joints.



Tight, prolonged grasping with the fingers and the thumb can significantly increase joint swelling and pain. Always use the lightest grasp necessary to complete a task and use tools with large handles or build up tools or utensils with foam tubing (the kind used to insulate pipes). Following these simple joint protection techniques can reduce damage and pain to your hand joints. If you have questions or concerns about your hand pain or function, or if you would like to learn more about joint protection, ask your doctor. He or she may recommend a visit to the hand therapist who can instruct you in specific joint protection techniques that can help reduce damage and pain in your hands.