

INFORMATION FOR PATIENTS

Hand Therapy

Hand osteoarthritis (OA)

Living with hand osteoarthritis (OA)

Hand osteoarthritis (OA) occurs when the cartilage that cushions your hand joints wears away over time. This leads to pain, stiffness, and difficulty with everyday tasks such as gripping and lifting.

How common is hand OA?

More than 4.4 million people in the UK have hand OA. About one in five adults over the age of 55 experiences pain at the base of the thumb.

What increases the risk of hand OA?

Several factors can raise your likelihood of developing hand OA, including previous hand injuries, being female, getting older, having a family history of arthritis, obesity, repetitive hand use in certain jobs, other joint conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis, and naturally loose or 'hypermobility' joints.

What happens inside the joints?

As the cartilage wears down, the space between the bones narrows. The bones can rub together and develop small bony growths called osteophytes. The joint may become inflamed, painful, swollen, and gradually change shape. These changes can reduce your range of motion and grip strength.

How is hand OA diagnosed?

Your doctor or therapist will ask about your symptoms, examine the movement and posture of your hands, and look for signs of swelling or deformity. An x-ray may be taken, but the amount of wear on the image does not always match the amount of pain you feel.

Aims of hand therapy

Hand therapy focuses on improving joint movement, stretching tight tissues, strengthening the muscles that support your fingers and thumbs, enhancing joint stability, teaching pain-management strategies, and showing you how to modify activities to reduce joint stress.

Pain-relieving medication

Medication can help you stay active by reducing pain and inflammation. Your pharmacist or doctor can advise which option is right for you.

Helping to manage pain and inflammation

Alongside medication, physical treatments can soothe sore joints and keep them moving.

Contrast bathing

Contrast bathing involves dipping your hands in warm water for about three minutes, then in cool water for one minute, and repeating the cycle several times. Use caution if your joints are very swollen or if you have poor circulation (e.g., from Raynaud's).

Heat

Applying gentle heat—such as a warm pack, microwaveable wheat bag, warm-water soak, or paraffin wax bath—can relax muscles and reduce joint stiffness. Avoid using heat on joints that are actively swollen and hot.

Compression

Compression gloves provide gentle pressure, warmth, and support. They can be worn during daily tasks or at night to reduce stiffness and swelling.

Examples of these are neoprene gloves or Lycra gloves or Coban for individual fingers/joints.

Splinting

Splints support painful joints in a stable position. They may be custom-made or off-the-shelf. Splints help reduce strain, improve alignment, and support function.

Examples of off-shelf are a thumb splint, a push brace and a neoprene thumb spica.

An example of an off-shelf wrist support is a futura splint (it is important to adjust the metal bar within these supports for effective support and comfort).

Exercises for your hands and wrists

Gentle exercise keeps your joints flexible and strong. During flare-ups, exercises should be slow and comfortable. Repeat each movement 5 to 10 times, 3 to 4 times a day.

Protecting your joints

Joint protection means organising how you work and play to reduce stress on your joints and minimise pain.

Joint protection principles include:

- Respect pain. Pain is often an indication of inflammation in osteoarthritis. Pain for more than an hour after an activity generally means you have done too much.
- Balance rest and activities. Take frequent breaks to rest or change your activity/position. Pace yourself - do what you can do safely and gradually increase the activity in small amounts over a period of weeks.
- Use joints in their correct movement pattern. Avoid lifting heavy loads or leaning your weight through the fingers/wrists.
- Distribute the weight over several joints by either using two hands or pushing things along surfaces to reduce lifting and carrying.
- Use the largest joint for the task.
- Avoid prolonged or tight grips.
- Avoid resistive shearing forces such as opening jars or stiff taps (this can be aided by assistive devices).

Helpful tools and devices

Using the right equipment can make daily tasks easier, reduce strain, and help you stay independent.

Further sources of information

NHS Choices: www.nhs.uk/conditions

Our website: www.sfh-tr.nhs.uk

Patient Experience Team (PET)

PET is available to help with any of your compliments, concerns or complaints, and will ensure a prompt and efficient service.

King's Mill Hospital: 01623 672222

Newark Hospital: 01636 685692

Email: sfh-tr.PET@nhs.net

If you would like this information in an alternative format, for example large print or easy read, or if you need help with communicating with us, for example because you use British Sign Language, please let us know. You can call the Patient Experience Team on 01623 672222 or email sfh-tr.PET@nhs.net.

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