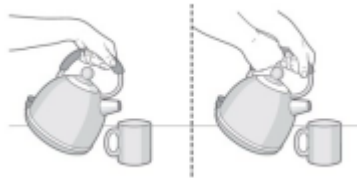
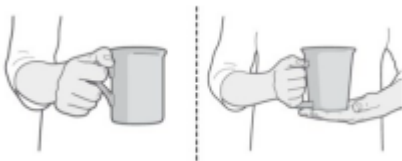


Joint protection techniques for hand and finger arthritis



Hand Therapy Team

St Georges Hospital

The following booklet provides you with information on how to look after the joints of your hands in the presence of arthritis. This information will help to reduce the strain put on individual joints which can lead to further joint damage or deformity.

These techniques are general principles only and you will need to consider them in relation to the things that you need to do throughout your day. If you require more specific advice regarding work, home or sporting activities, your therapist will be able to provide you with this.

How do I protect my joints?

There are six basic rules for protecting your joints:

1. Respect pain
2. Where possible, use larger, stronger joints
3. Reduce the effort and force
4. Find a balance between rest and activity
5. Exercise in a pain free range
6. Avoid positions of deformity during day to day activities

Respect Pain

- Stop doing an activity **before** you get discomfort
 - It is important to take notice of your pain and to use it as a warning sign. Pushing yourself to complete an activity can often cause more pain the following day.
 - Pace yourself. This allows you to keep doing activities that you enjoy, rather than having to give them up.
 - Try to work out your own pain threshold. How long can you do an activity before you feel pain?
- Avoid or do less of the activities that cause you prolonged pain
 - Try and take a break before you get pain or discomfort rather than reaching this point before stopping.

Use larger, strong joints

Here are some examples and ideas of how to distribute weight and load more evenly throughout your hands and arms:

- Slide heavy objects along kitchen tops/tables rather than picking them up.
- Use your palms instead of your fingers to lift or push.
- Use your hip or shoulder instead of your hand to close drawers and doors.
- Carry a backpack instead of holding a purse in your hand, or carry bags over your forearm.
- Keep small items close to your body and try to spread the load over several joints:
 - Use two hands and avoid excessive gripping with your thumb.
 - Keep as much of your hand as possible in contact with the object you are carrying.
- Hug bigger objects close to your body so that the weight is better supported by your arms.

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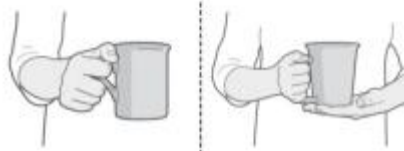
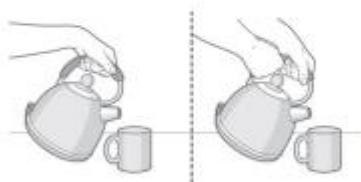


Figure One: Some examples of how to distribute loads more effectively whilst lifting and carrying

Reduce the effort and force during a task

- Where possible, ask for help!
- Try and use appliances and assistive devices; these can help make day-to-day tasks easier by reducing strain on your joints – see below for some examples.
- Keep items near to where you use them so that you have easy access to them.
- Where possible, use prepared foods and freeze leftovers for an easy meal.
- Avoid low chairs and beds.
- Try to maintain a healthy body weight – your GP can provide you with information and support for this.
- Try to avoid going up and down stairs frequently. Try to organise a task so that you can remain on one floor for the duration of that task.
- Try to take frequent breaks when doing activities, and if possible, reduced the amount of time undertaking an activity.
- Use padding to build up grips on items such as knives and forks or pens, to ease the pressure on the smaller joints in the hand.



Figure Two: Examples of using built up grips on day to day items

Balance rest and activity

Many people give up on an activity if it causes them pain. By breaking the activity down and doing a little bit at a time, with adequate rest breaks, you may find that you won't have to stop doing something that you enjoy.

Once you have developed a good understanding of your pain threshold and energy levels, try to use this guide below to manage your activities during the day.

- Take frequent breaks during an activity
- Avoid doing prolonged activities where you are unable to take a break
- Avoid staying in one position for a long time
- Alternate between heavy and light activities
- Allow yourself extra time for activities to avoid rushing
- Plan your day ahead of time and factor in rest breaks throughout your day, where possible.
- Reduce the activities that you do not need to do, or get someone else to assist you with the activity.

EXAMPLE

How to break up your activities:

1. Do some light washing up
2. Then fold some clothes
3. Wipe down a bench top
4. Make a cup of tea
5. Fold some more clothes

Exercise in a pain free range

By making the muscles around your joints stronger you are less likely to develop pain in your joints and, in the longer term, joint deformities. Exercise can also help you to maintain your range of movement and decrease stiffness in the joints.

Your therapist may give you some exercises to help maintain your movement and to minimise joint stiffness, however there are also a few exercise tips that you can incorporate into your programme to improve your movement further:

- Try doing your hand exercises in warm water as this can help to relax the muscles in your hands, making it easier to do the exercises and to decrease pain in your joints.
- Balance between exercise and rest. Don't over exercise your hands.
- Do not do any strengthening exercises if your joints are swollen and painful, or if you are having a flare up.
- If you get any pain that lasts longer than one hour after exercise, it may be that this exercise is too stressful for your joints. Discontinue the exercise and discuss it again when you next see your therapist.

Avoid 'positions of deformity'

Arthritis can sometimes cause deformities in the joints of the fingers and hands. Sometimes, by changing the way you do an activity you can reduce the strain on your joints, and potentially minimise the deformity. Examples include:

- Trying to become aware of how you use the joints that are painful in your hand. Think about how they move when you undertake certain activities. For example, think and look at what is happening to your fingers when using a tap. Are the fingers being pushed towards the little finger?

If so, this could be corrected by turning the tap on with one hand and off with the other, making sure you're always moving your fingers towards the thumb.

- Use stable joint positions where possible. For example, when you are trying to pinch an object between your index finger and thumb, try to ensure that you maintain an 'O' position with these digits and keep your wrist straight.
- Try and make sure that work surfaces are at the right height for you so that you do not have to bend or over stretch when you are working at them.



Remember the four Ps for protecting your finger joints:

- **Problem Solve:** If a task causes you pain or discomfort think about ways you could do it differently.
- **Plan:** Plan the things that you need to do for the day/week and try to space out the more demanding tasks.
- **Prioritise:** Decide whether something needs to be done today; done at all or can be done partly or wholly by someone else.
- **Pace yourself:** Break tasks up and spread them throughout the day or week, with regular short rest breaks. Try not to do the same activity for a prolonged period of time.

Other ways to help yourself

Arthritis can affect your ability to do your day to day work, leisure and household activities. As we've seen in this booklet, trying to change the way that you organise and undertake activities during your daily life can have a significant impact on joint pain, movement and function.

If your therapist has given you exercises, try to continue these as much as possible, even when you're feeling well and not in any pain. This will continue to help build up muscle strength and endurance.

If you have been provided with splints, braces or supports by your therapist, please make sure that you wear them as advised. These, in combination with exercise and joint protection, can go a long way in decreasing pain and improving function in your hand and wrist.

Where possible, try to simplify your daily tasks as much as you can. Your therapist can advise you further on ideas, techniques and assistive equipment and devices to reduce the strain on your joints and can suggest practical changes to support you in your day to day activities.

Questions or concerns?

If you have any questions regarding the information provided in this booklet, please feel free to discuss them with your therapist at your next appointment. For more urgent queries the team can be contacted on the **treatment enquiries** phone number listed below.

Your therapist is _____

Treatment enquiries: 020 8725 1038 (answer phone only)

Appointments: 020 8725 0007

Other useful information:

Versus Arthritis

Copeman House, St Mary's Court, St Mary's Gate,
Chesterfield S41 7TD

Phone: 0800 5200 520

Website: www.versusarthritis.org

Arthritis care

Saffron House, 6-10 Kirby Street, London, EC1N 8EQ

Phone: 0808 800 4050

Website: www.arthritiscare.org.uk

For more information leaflets on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit www.stgeorges.nhs.uk

Additional services

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

PALS can offer you on-the-spot advice and information when you have comments or concerns about our services or the care you have received. You can visit the PALS office between 9am and 5pm, Monday to Friday in the main corridor between Grosvenor and Lanesborough Wing (near the lift foyer).

Tel: 020 8725 2453 **Email:** pals@stgeorges.nhs.uk

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