



Coping with Osteoarthritis in the Fingers and Hands

by SUSAN CASSIDY

Osteoarthritis in Fingers and Hands

Managing osteoarthritis in your fingers and hands can make everyday tasks like tying your shoes, opening jars, and even holding your cell phone painful. You may notice that your grip isn't as strong as it used to be, or you may start to modify activities that require the use of your hands.

For example, using a hair dryer and a rolling brush on my hair would start to bother my hands when I did it every day. I shortened my style by getting a slightly shorter cut and let it dry on its own; it's just one way to give my hands a break.

If you suffer from OA in your hands and fingers, you may want to consider working with a physical therapist every few months to get an overview of how your range of motion is doing, exercises to try and new ideas for any assistive technology you may benefit from.

Identifying OA in the Fingers and Hands

When you already have any kind of arthritis, I think it can be easy to dismiss any aches and pains and self-diagnose.

I say this because it is still my first reaction when I notice any new symptoms. Even if you already manage any kind of condition, you need to get it checked out by your general doctor or your rheumatologist.

Your doctor most likely will document your current symptoms, take an x-ray to confirm the diagnosis and establish a baseline of any bone damage. That way, when you return for periodic visits, progress can be compared with the original.

Between visits, try to track your symptoms to see if you can identify any patterns with activity, stress, and nutrition in relationship to your pain levels.

Inflammation

Inflammation plays a part in OA, even though it is not always identified as an inflammatory kind of arthritis, like RA or lupus.

Arthritis in the hands can often result in painful joints, loss of mobility, bone spurs, and weakness. Depending on which one is most bothersome at the moment will help you choose which kind of therapy or treatment you want to try first.

Painful joints

If your joints are warm, red, and feel stiff when you first wake up, you may be having an inflammatory reaction. There are ways to make your hands feel better like heat and gentle exercises. You also want to share this with your rheumatologist because an anti-inflammatory medication may calm your symptoms for a time.

Loss of mobility

Between the stiffness in your hands and the pain in your fingers, you may find you can't move your hand with the same range of motion as you used to. Or you may find that after a short time of a repetitive task, your fingers get sore or stiff. Hand stretching exercises can help, as well as utilizing assistive technology when available.

Bone spurs

Bone spurs are growths of bone that can grow near damaged joints in a misguided attempt to be helpful. What they usually end up doing is pushing on a nerve that can cause pain. This can also cause unsightly bumps on your fingers or knuckles.

There's not much to be done from a cosmetic point of view, but your doctor may have suggestions on how to keep them from causing too much pain.

Weakness

I first noticed a weakness in my hands when I started dropping things in the kitchen more often. At first, I thought I was just distracted, but when I started to pay closer attention, I found I couldn't grip as well or open jars nearly as often. Switching to lighter plates helped, as well as using an assistive tool to help open jars.

Everyday Modifications for Osteoarthritis in the Fingers

There are numerous tips and tricks to help your hands make it through the day.

Asking for help and seeking out solutions can feel overwhelming at times, but your main goal is always pain relief and preventing injury. Connect with other OA patients online, read articles to get new ideas, and stay open-minded.

Treating osteoarthritis is a multi-faceted endeavor, no matter where in your body. These suggestions may not help on their own, but when paired with heat therapy, anti-inflammatory treatments, or over the counter pain relievers, can add up to making your day more manageable:

- **Take a look at how much your hands do while you are getting dressed.** Try to eliminate any kind of clothing that makes it challenging to get on or off independently. Switch to loafers or Velcro sneakers, use long zippers or tie a ribbon to help grip, and avoid buttons.
- **In the kitchen, use two hands for everything, even if by habit you are used to using only one.** A little support can't hurt, especially with anything hot! There are grips to help open jars, and you can reduce cutting time by purchasing vegetables pre-cut. If you prefer to cut your own veggies, try to do it in one session with a good knife and store the rest for another serving.
- **If you type at your job or just because you like catching up with people online, be sure you're taking breaks to give your hands a stretch.** Consider switching to dictation technology and keep a good posture to help ease tension in your shoulder and arms.
- **Playing the piano, knitting, coloring, and writing are activities often enjoyed for stress relief.** When you're managing OA, you know you need your ways to manage! If you find the majority of your activities involve your hands, you may need to branch out to try something new or get a little creative to modify your activities.

One Hand Washes the Other

Osteoarthritis in the fingers and hands can really slow you down. You may need to look at how much your hands

are working during the day to see where you can modify what you're doing.

Osteoarthritis seldom affects only one area for very long. Be kind to your other joints while you are looking out for your hands.

If the pain extends to your arms and shoulders, or if you have inflammation in your ribs, switching to a light shoulder bag or a rolling backpack can save your joints additional stress.

Save your energy for light yoga or swimming, exercises your whole body will thank you for.