# Osteoarthritis in Hands: Protecting Your Joints

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## Coping With Osteoarthritis in Hands and Fingers

Your hands and fingers are subject to a lot of wear and tear over the years; because you use them constantly, they may develop osteoarthritis due to degeneration. If you have injured your hands or fingers at any phase of your life, you are more likely to develop arthritis of the injured part earlier than if you had not sustained an injury.

### Signs of Osteoarthritis in the Hands and Fingers

The most common symptom of osteoarthritis in your hands and fingers is pain and stiffness, which may be worse when the weather is damp or if it is going to rain.

Other indicators are:

- You are more likely to have arthritis in your hands and fingers if you have arthritis in other parts of your body
- Due to structural changes in your joints and surrounding tissues, you may hear or feel grating of the joints in your hands and fingers when you move them
- Your range of motion in your hands or fingers may be restricted

### Visible Changes in Your Hands and Fingers

On top of pain and stiffness, you may experience visual changes that indicate osteoarthritis in your hands and fingers. These changes can be deformities of your hands, mostly in the form of hard lumps called nodes.

Women are more likely than men to develop hard lumps in the finger joints, called Heberden's nodes. They may cause the ends of your fingers to bend sideways.

Another type of node, called Bouchard’s node, is less common. Bouchard's nodules form at the first joint of the fingers.

Both types of nodules may cause redness, swelling and discomfort. The affected area may ache or be tender to touch. Often the changes begin in one finger, but progress to multiple digits as the disease progresses.

Some people with osteoarthritis are embarrassed by the deformities nodes and other changes in the hands develop, however there is little to be done to stop the changes.

### Protect the Joints of Your Hands and Fingers

It is important you take steps to protect your joints and prevent further damage. One way to do this is by avoiding twisting and ringing movements of your hands as much as possible. Use ergonomically correct and larger tools to

assist you and avoid gripping items tightly.

Use your larger muscles to perform tasks. For example, if you are carrying a purse, choose one with a shoulder strap rather than a clutch bag.

Limit grasping movements when possible and break up repetitive tasks. For example, take breaks if you are using scissors, knives or writing implements. Choose hobbies that do not require the use of repetitive actions for prolonged periods of time. For example, if you suffer from arthritis, knitting or needlepoint may not be the best choices for you.

*Next page: methods for making hygiene and dressing easier on your hands and fingers*

**Look for Ways to Make Life Easier**

Rather than simply performing activities out of habit, pay attention to your daily tasks and make modifications as needed. For example, if you are going to drive a long distance, be prepared to take breaks so you can rest your hands.

Stretch out your fingers now and then as you travel, consider wearing driving gloves, and avoid gripping the steering wheel too tightly. Becoming aware of your daily activities and taking steps to modify them is a highly effective way to reduce discomfort, prevent joint damage, and prolong your ability to use your hands and fingers effectively.

If you need assistance coming up with ways to make life easier and more comfortable, ask your health care provider to refer you to occupational therapists. They are experts who can teach you exercises and strategies for living well despite your arthritis.

**Make Hygiene Simple**

Consider purchasing an electric toothbrush. If you prefer a manual one, choose a toothbrush with a large, fat handle. Avoid purchasing toothpaste that comes in a tube with a narrow cap and instead opt for one with a large cap or with a dispenser button.

Use personal care products that are easy to handle. Consider using soap on a rope in the shower so you won't lose your grip and drop the soap, creating a fall hazard. Consider using a bath mitt rather than a brush or washcloth when you bathe.

**Choose Your Clothing Carefully**

When shopping for clothes, be on the lookout for clothing you can get on and off easily. Avoid clothes with buttons, small zippers, and other difficult fastenings.

Other suggestions for clothing to make dressing simpler are:

- Clothing made from stretchable fabrics
- Clothing with elastic around the waistline
- Velcro fastenings on shoes

- If you wear a necktie, choose the clip-on styles
- Make sure your clothing fits you well, as clothes that are too tight are harder to put on

**Protect Your Joints in the Kitchen**

Several interventions and devices are available to make kitchen chores easier:

- Utensils with built-up handles
- Plates with a suction cup bottom and built-up edges
- Devices to help you open jars

*Next page: more interventions to ease joints in the kitchen*

**Look for Ways to Make Life Easier**

- Food processors and stand mixers can be useful
- Use electric rather than manual can openers
- Use lightweight kitchen wear
- If you have a dishwasher, take advantage of it
- Store foods in easy-to-open containers
- You may find it easier to eat finger foods rather than dinners requiring the use of knives and forks
- Plan simple meals that don't require a great deal of peeling, chopping or stirring
- Take advantage of high-quality convenience foods

**Modify Your Environment**

There are many ways you can modify your home to make life easier for you. If you heat your home with wood and have a back- up source of energy available, use the simpler method of heating your home. Carrying logs and loading wood stoves can subject your hands to potential injury and may be painful.

Consider having knobs on cabinets replaced with larger ones if necessary. Let your loved ones know if you experience difficulty or discomfort performing tasks and accept their offers to provide assistance.

**Take Advantage of Technology**

Purchase telephones with large buttons to aid dialing. You may prefer to use speed or voice dialing.

Notice if your hands and fingers feel more comfortable when you use a keyboard rather than a pen or pencil to write. You could even try to learn how to use voice-activated word processing programs for correspondence.

Use a hands-free headset or speaker phone so you do not have to grasp the telephone for long periods if you talk on the telephone frequently. Enjoy audio books or books on tablets if your hands are uncomfortable turning pages.

**Live Well Despite Osteoarthritis of the Hands and Fingers**

There are many ways you can protect your joints and make living with hand and finger arthritis more comfortable. Be open to trying new approaches and using strategies to reduce wear and tear on your joints.

Notice what activities are most irritating to your hands and fingers and take steps to reduce, eliminate or modify them. Take advantage of the many products available to make your life simpler and more comfortable.