Three Ways to Manage Arthritis in the Hands Symptoms

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Arthritis in the Hands

Osteoarthritis is a degenerative condition that can affect joints anywhere in the body, and when it is found in the hands it can dramatically impact your life. The cartilage between your joints wears away and when the bones rub together, it can be very painful. It can also cause weakness, inflammation and bone growths.

Since we use our hands for almost all of our essential daily tasks, the pain and stiffness that results from OA can leave you feeling extremely frustrated. Managing osteoarthritis of any kind requires a great deal of trial and error.

Your therapies will most likely be a combination of pain relief, physical therapy, heat, rest, and diet. It's been my experience that if you mix and match, you can often find a combination that will work for a while before you need to seek out something new. If you start to notice pain, stiffness or weakness in your hands, the first thing you'll want to do is confirm the diagnosis.

Carpal tunnel syndrome can present similar symptoms, and the treatments vary depending on the underlying root cause. You can start the conversation with your primary doctor, and they will most likely refer you to an orthopedic specialist.

What Causes Osteoarthritis?

Osteoarthritis is considered the "wear and tear" type of arthritis because it most often presents when cartilage breaks down over time from aging. Cartilage is the flexible tissue at the end of bones that help them rub together without stiffness or pain.

Most people will experience some kind of osteoarthritis naturally the older they age, and women are diagnosed more often than men. However, it can occur at any age for other reasons. Genetics play a significant role, so if you have a parent or relative with OA the odds of you developing it are increased. Talk to your family. If you learn of a history of osteoarthritis and you're noticing symptoms, you'll want to inform your doctor because it helps confirm the diagnosis.

Osteoarthritis can be seen clearly on X-rays so once they know where to look, it's pretty straightforward. Another cause of osteoarthritis is when you have suffered an injury to your hands or work with them so extensively throughout the workday they are susceptible to overuse. After a trauma or surgery to your hands, scar tissue can form and cause osteoarthritis damage.

If you run the risk of developing OA from your genetic history, be extra careful to not perform activities that overuse your joints as much as possible. Take breaks, use adaptive tools and ask for help if you need it.

Obesity causes osteoarthritis to worsen because your body works harder to support any extra weight. That work is usually in the form of inflammation in your joints. Losing even just a few pounds of weight will significantly

relieve your body of OA symptoms especially in your knees, hips, and feet. That being said, overall inflammation is reduced with weight loss, so it can help relieve symptoms in your hands as well.

Next page: How to cope with arthritis in the hands on a day to day basis and natural remedies.

Day to Day Modifications

Osteoarthritis symptoms vary in intensity from individual to individual. Dull, aching pain in the wrists and fingers is most often the first sign that something isn't feeling quite right.

You may have found yourself making small accommodations for your osteoarthritis pain and stiffness throughout the day without even being aware of it. Working with an occupational therapist will provide you with specific ways to help you get through the day more comfortably.

Also, you may even be prescribed this therapy from your orthopedist for a short time with the goal of improving mobility. Even small changes throughout the day can really add up to reducing painful symptoms.

For your home

- Ask for prescriptions to be filled in easy to remove tops.
- Use a tool to open jars like a grip pad or jar opener.
- Use a dishwasher if possible; if not, soak dishes to reduce scrubbing.
- When driving, relax your hands on the wheel and stretch them at stops.

For your job

- Switch out a traditional keyboard for an ergonomic one. If that is causing too much pain, see if you can switch to using dictation technology to cut down time you physically type.
- If you use your hands for larger tasks, consider trying compression gloves to support your hands while you work and be sure to stretch and rest your hands whenever you find a chance.
- Be sure to communicate your condition to your employer if you need more support to do your job safely.

Natural Remedies for Arthritis in the Hands

Your orthopedist or rheumatologist may prescribe anti-inflammatory medication and/or pain relief medication to manage your osteoarthritis symptoms.

Be very careful to keep track of what medications you're taking and what risk factors or combinations are possible. Your pharmacist can answer any questions, and there are apps like MediSafe that can help you stay informed.

If you decide the side effects are not worth it for you, or you are unable to take any prescription medication for whatever reason, there are numerous natural paths you can explore to see what works for you. You can also join an OA forum or community group where you can share your ideas and learn from people close to home.

Natural Remedies for Osteoarthritis of the Hands

- **Yoga:** the gentle stretching and calm practice of yoga help improve OA symptoms and overall mood without being time-consuming or expensive. You can grab a mat for about $20 and stream videos online to get started. Practicing in a group also helps to keep you social, since chronic pain can keep your home more often than you'd like.
- **Acupuncture:** there have been numerous connections between osteoarthritis symptoms and relief from acupuncture. The needles are very thin and the process can be relaxing for many people; however, it is not for everyone. It's worth exploring at least once to see how you feel.

- **Hot and cold therapy:** applying heating pads or warming a towel can help alleviate OA symptoms. I find heat therapy at the end of the day to be especially helpful on sore joints. Compression gloves add warmth as well as support. Cold therapy works best for me after working out to soothe sore muscles.
- **Natural oils:** stress adds to any kind of chronic condition, so anything you do to relieve stress is going to help. Diffuser oils can often improve mood and sleep quality, with some reducing anxiety as well. Even a couple of drops into an Epsom salt bath can relax tired muscles and sore joints.
- **Supplements:** consult with your personal physician for information before taking supplements. You want to be sure you're taking what your body needs, and you need to be certain they don't interact negatively with other medication you're currently taking.

Next page: prescription medication and surgery options for arthritis in the hands, and more.

Prescription Medications and Surgery for Arthritis in the Hands

There may be times throughout your treatment of osteoarthritis that your rheumatologist will suggest a course of anti-inflammatory medications (most common are called NSAIDs, which is like a prescription strength aspirin), pain relieving medication, or prescription strength pain patches or creams.

Each osteoarthritis medication has its own benefits and potential side effects, so be sure to talk with other people on your treatment team to see if these paths are right for you.

Depending on the progression of your osteoarthritis, surgery may be an option to alleviate pain. Bone spurs are bony growths that can develop as your body's way of trying to help, but they can become painful if developed too close to a nerve. There are procedures where the growth may be able to be removed or decreased to aid in pain management.

The other two types of surgery for osteoarthritis in the hand are joint fusion and joint replacement. Your orthopedist will be able to determine which one will work best given your medical history and current pain symptoms as well as range of motion and weakness.

- **Joint fusion is performed to alleviate pain by fusing the bones together at the joint.** It will not be able to move anymore, but if there was a significant loss of motion already it may be a viable option. Work out a plan ahead of time for how to adapt to the limited motion to help ease the recovery process.
- **Joint replacement removes the damaged joint and using an implant in place of it.** These surgeries can be highly successful in regaining mobility. After any kind of surgery, be sure to follow your doctor's instructions for physical therapy. If you aren't consistent, recovery could be more difficult and last longer than it needs to.

Keep Your Chin Up

Chronic illness can leave you feeling isolated when you need to rest or change your plans because of managing osteoarthritis. It will help your mood to stay connected with people as much as you're able to either in person or online.

There are forums and groups designed to help you on this challenging journey. Sometimes talking to someone who specifically knows what you are going through can provide a great deal of stress relief.

Creating time in the day to exercise even for a short time will boost your mood and keep you flexible. I know it's not easy, and there are times when gentle stretching may be all you can do some days. The more time you can carve out to participate in a physical activity you enjoy, the more it will help your OA symptoms.

If your favorite activities involved your hands, don't worry that you have to give them up entirely. Look for ways to modify how you do them or for how long. Instead of twenty or thirty minutes at one time, try breaking up the task every ten minutes and give your hands a rest. If you can't find a solution that works, bring it up with your

orthopedist or physical therapist and see if they can provide some suggestions specific to your needs.

Be Kind to Yourself

Even with the best efforts of you and your medical team, there are going to be times that feel overwhelming and frustrating. Be sure to give yourself a break if you're having a bad day and focus on what you are still able to do.

Osteoarthritis is a chronic condition, and with some time you will adjust to the ups and downs along the way. Just hang on for the ups when you're down and have a blast when you're feeling your best.