



How to Care for Arthritic Hands

Expert
Reviewed

Three Methods: [Obtaining Medical Treatment](#) [Relieving Pain on Your Own](#) [Exercising Your Hands](#)

Arthritis, in general, is the inflammation of joints. If you have arthritis in your hands, then you likely have inflammation in one or more of the joints in your hand or wrist. Arthritis in the hands can be caused both by disease (osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis) or an injury to your hand. In order to help manage the pain, inflammation, and other changes to your hands, it is important that you take proper care of your arthritic hands.^[1]

Method
1

Obtaining Medical Treatment

1 Take recommended medications. Your doctor may recommend that you take certain medications on a regular basis to help reduce the inflammation and pain caused by the arthritis. Some of these medications, like ibuprofen (an anti-inflammatory), does not require a prescription and can be taken several times a day. The following medications have been known to relieve the pain and inflammation caused by arthritis:^[2]

- Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs — otherwise known as NSAIDs, these types of medication include ibuprofen (e.g. Advil) and acetaminophen (e.g. Tylenol). Most NSAIDs are available in some form as over-the-counter medications, but you can also get a prescriptions for stronger versions of NSAIDS (i.e. Tylenol 3s and 4s, etc.)^[3]
- Corticosteroids — mainly used to control inflammation. These drugs are administered with an injection. Oral corticosteroids may be given for rheumatoid arthritis.^[4]
- Analgesics — target only pain relief and do not control inflammation and include acetaminophen (i.e. Tylenol). Analgesics are also available in a cream form (e.g. Voltaren) and can be rubbed into the skin around the area that's painful. Low level analgesics (like regular strength Tylenol) and a variety of the cream versions, are available over-the-counter. Stronger versions of analgesics are available by prescription.^[5]
- Disease-modifying anti-rheumatic drugs — otherwise known as DMARDs, these drugs actually work to modify your arthritis. DMARDs are available only by prescription.^[6]
- Biologic response modifiers — used mainly for rheumatoid arthritis, they work to block specific steps in the inflammation process of your body. Biologics are only available by prescription.^[7]
- Osteoporosis medications — help to slow bone loss or help to build new bone. There are a number of drugs that are used to treat osteoporosis and all are available only by prescription.^[8]

2 Treat pain with injections. If anti-inflammatory medications are not successful, your doctor may recommend getting regular injections at the site of your arthritis. These injections usually include an anesthetic and a steroid, and they can last for several months.^[9]

- While you may find injections successful, they are only meant to be a temporary measure and cannot be continued indefinitely.

3 Splint your hands and/or wrists. Splints can also be used on your hands and wrists in addition to, or instead of, medication or injections. A splint will help support and stabilize your hand or wrist in order to reduce the stress placed upon it by certain activities.^[10]

- Splints are normally worn for a limited time every day, as opposed to all day, every day. Most arthritis sufferers tend to use splints when performing specific activities which may cause them more pain, such as typing, driving, painting, gardening, etc.

4 Consider surgery for your affected hand. Unfortunately medications and injections do not always work as well as we'd like. Another option to consider is hand surgery. The exact type of surgery will be catered to your specific situation, but the main goal of the surgery is to reduce the pain over the long-term.^{[11][12]}

- Surgery where the joint can be saved or reconstructed is always the first, and best, option. However, if it isn't possible to save the joint as is, your doctor may perform a joint replacement or a fusion.
- Fusing the joint(s) together can significantly reduce the amount of pain you experience, but it will permanently remove any movement you have in that joint. The fact that the joint cannot move is how the pain is eliminated, as the joint can no longer rub together.
- Joint replacement involves replacing your original joint with a man-made joint. Man-made joints usually consist of plastic, metals or ceramic and can last a very long time. A joint replacement will not only eliminate the pain you're experiencing, but it will allow you to continue to use your hand normally.

5 Attend after surgery hand therapy. No matter what type of surgery you may have, you will need to perform hand therapy (a type of physical therapy) afterwards. Initially after surgery you may be asked to wear a splint full-time in order to limit the movement of your hand while it heals. You may also need to change the activities you perform until your hand or wrist is strong enough.^[13]

- Most people can recommence normal activities approximately 3 months after surgery. However, the speed of your recovery is high dependent on the effort you put towards taking care of your hand or wrist.

Method
2

Relieving Pain on Your Own

- 1 Use an ice pack to reduce inflammation.** If the joint in your hands or wrists are swollen and painful from arthritis, you can use an ice pack or cold compress to help reduce the swelling and relieve the pain.^[14]
- 2 Keep your hands warm.** If your hands or wrists are painful from arthritic inflammation that won't go away, heating up your hands may give you pain relief. In fact, many arthritis sufferers usually experience more pain in cold environments and find keeping their hands or wrists warm all the time (e.g. wearing gloves) can help relieve pain.^[15]
 - Wearing cotton gloves while you sleep can also help to keep your hands warm and may help reduce the amount of pain in your hands and wrists.^[16]
 - Using a hot wax dip on your hands every morning can help start your hands off nice and warm every day. The hot wax can be kept in a crock pot and re-used many times.
- 3 Get an assistive device.** Arthritis in your hands will likely cause you not to be able to perform certain activities, such as: opening a tight lid on a jar, gripping something tightly, prying open a container, etc. There are many products on the market that can help make all those activities easier for you, especially if you don't always have someone else around to help.^[17]
 - The internet is usually your best source for determining what products are available and finding out where you can get them. Google "arthritis self-help devices" and research which products would be best for you.
- 4 Take glucosamine and chondroitin supplements.** Glucosamine and chondroitin supplements can be found at most pharmacies and health stores. They have been shown to reduce the amount of pain and stiffness in people who have osteoarthritis, but they do not work on everyone. You may want to try taking these supplements for 2 months to see if they have a positive effect on your hand or wrist pain. If they do not give you any relief, there is no point in continuing to take them.^[18]
 - Note that glucosamine and chondroitin manufacturers claim these supplements can help rebuild cartilage in your joints. However, there have been no scientific studies to confirm this is an accurate claim and these supplements are not approved by the FDA for that purpose.
- 5 Eat more fish.** Omega-3, which can be found in many types of fish and in fish oil capsules, can potentially reduce the amount of inflammation in your body. While this doesn't work for everyone, trying a fish oil supplement or adding more fish to your diet can be an option to try.^[19]

Method
3

Exercising Your Hands

1 Bend your thumb. Hold your right hand in a comfortable and relaxed position with all your fingers and your thumb held straight. Bend your right thumb across your palm (or as far as you can) and touch the bottom of your little finger. Then bend your thumb back to the original position.^[20]

- Repeat this exercise as many times as is comfortable with your right hand.
- Once finished with your right hand, repeat the same exercise with your left hand.

2 Extend your fingers. Hold your right hand upwards with your fingers straight and with no gaps between them. Bend the tips of your fingers downwards towards your palm. Bend only the first and second knuckles, while keeping your hand and fingers straight. Unfold your fingers and return your hand to your starting position.^[21]

- Bend and unbend your fingers slowly and smoothly.
- Repeat this exercise as many times as is comfortable with your right hand.
- Once finished with your right hand, repeat the same exercise with your left hand.

3 Make a fist. Rest the outside of your right fingers, hand and wrist on a flat surface. Start by holding your hand at a 90 degree angle to the flat surface, with your fingers pointed straight. While keeping your hand resting on the flat surface, close your hand to make a loose fist. Rest your thumb on the outside of your fist. Unfold your hand and put it back to the starting position.^[22]

- Bend and unbend your hand slowly and smoothly. When your hand is in a fist, don't squeeze your fingers.
- Repeat this exercise as many times as is comfortable with your right hand.
- Once finished with your right hand, repeat the same exercise with your left hand.

4 Curve your hand into a C. Hold your right hand out in front of you, like you're going to shake someone's hand. Hold your fingers straight without any gaps between them. Using your fingers and thumb to curve your hand into the shape of a C, like you're holding a can of pop. Un-curve your hand back to the original position.^[23]

- Curve and un-curve your fingers slowly and smoothly.
- Repeat this exercise as many times as is comfortable with your right hand.
- Once finished with your right hand, repeat the same exercise with your left hand.

5 Create circles with your fingers and thumb. Hold your right hand out in front of you, like you're going to shake someone's hand. Hold your fingers straight without any gaps between them. Start by curving your index finger and thumb so that the tips touch and form a circle. Repeat the process with your middle finger, then your ring finger and finally your little finger.^[24]

- Curve and un-curve your fingers slowly and smoothly.
- Repeat this exercise as many times as is comfortable with your right hand.
- Once finished with your right hand, repeat the same exercise with your left hand.

6 Slide your fingers across the table. Rest your right hand on a table with your palm down and your fingers straight. Keep a small gap between each of the fingers, and point your thumb away from your hand. Starting with your index finger, slide your finger to the left along the table until there's a larger gap between your index and middle fingers. Repeat the same movement with your middle, ring and little fingers.^[25]

- Once you've moved all four fingers on your right hand, move them back to the starting position and repeat the exercise as many times as is comfortable.
- When you're finished with your right hand, repeat the same exercise with your left hand.
- Regardless of which hand you're exercising, you're always moving your fingers towards your thumb.

Sources and Citations

1. <http://orthoinfo.aaos.org/topic.cfm?topic=a00224>

2. <http://orthoinfo.aaos.org/topic.cfm?topic=a00224>

3. <http://www.arthritis.org/about-arthritis/where-it-hurts/wrist-hand-and-finger-pain/treatment/hand-wrist-medication.php>

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