

Hand Osteoarthritis (OA)

Understanding and managing wear-and-tear arthritis in the hands



What is Hand OA?

Hand osteoarthritis is a common type of arthritis that happens when the cartilage that cushions the joints in your fingers, thumbs, and wrists breaks down over time. It's often called "wear-and-tear" arthritis, but that doesn't mean it's your fault. OA is influenced by age, genetics, joint shape, and even hormones.

Joints Most Commonly Affected

- DIP joints – end of the fingers
 - PIP joints – middle of the fingers
 - CMC joint – base of the thumb
 - These joints may look knobby, feel tender, or become harder to move over time.
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What Can You Do?

Medications

- Topical anti-inflammatory gels (like diclofenac/Voltaren)
- Oral NSAIDs (ibuprofen, naproxen): short-term use only
- Acetaminophen: less effective but gentler on the stomach

Injections: Steroid injections can help with pain in some joints.

Common Symptoms

- Stiffness, especially in the morning or after resting
 - Pain with movement or gripping
 - Swelling or tenderness around the joints
 - Bony bumps at the finger joints (called Heberden's or Bouchard's nodes)
 - Weak grip or difficulty opening jars, holding pens, etc.
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How is it Diagnosed?

Diagnosis is usually based on a combination of your symptoms, physical exam, and sometimes X-rays. Blood tests are typically not needed, as OA is not caused by inflammation like rheumatoid arthritis.

Lifestyle and At-Home Care

- Warm water soaks / paraffin wax for stiffness
- Splints or braces to support joints
- Stretching and gentle hand exercises to maintain mobility
- Pacing: breaks during repetitive tasks
- Ergonomic tools: wide-grip pens, jar openers, adaptive kitchen tools





Will it Get Worse?

Hand OA can worsen over time, but the rate is very individual. Some people plateau and stay stable for years. Early attention, joint protection, and consistent care can help prevent flare-ups and maintain function.



Tips from Your Rheumatologist

- **Don't ignore pain.** Pain is your body's signal to modify activity.
- **It's OK to use your hands.** Just not to the point of pain or strain.
- **Heat helps.** Stiff hands often respond better to warmth than ice.
- **Protect your thumbs.** The base of the thumb is especially vulnerable. Avoid forceful pinching or twisting.

When to See a Rheumatologist

- If symptoms are sudden or severe
- If you're unsure if it's OA or another type of arthritis
- If you've tried over-the-counter treatments without relief
- If hand pain is affecting your daily function or work

Key Points

- Hand OA is common and not your fault. Genetics and aging matter more than wear-and-tear.
- Stiffness, pain, and bony changes in the fingers or thumb base are classic signs.
- Gentle movement helps. Don't stop using your hands, just be mindful.
- Topical treatments, splints, and heat can help.
- OA is different from rheumatoid arthritis. It's not caused by inflammation.
- You're not alone. Supportive care can make a real difference.



Hand OA can be frustrating, but you are not alone, and there are many tools that can help you live well with it. Small changes in how you use your hands can make a big difference.

Every bit of relief counts.
Every gentle stretch matters.

