

Osteoarthritis of the Thumb

Information for patients

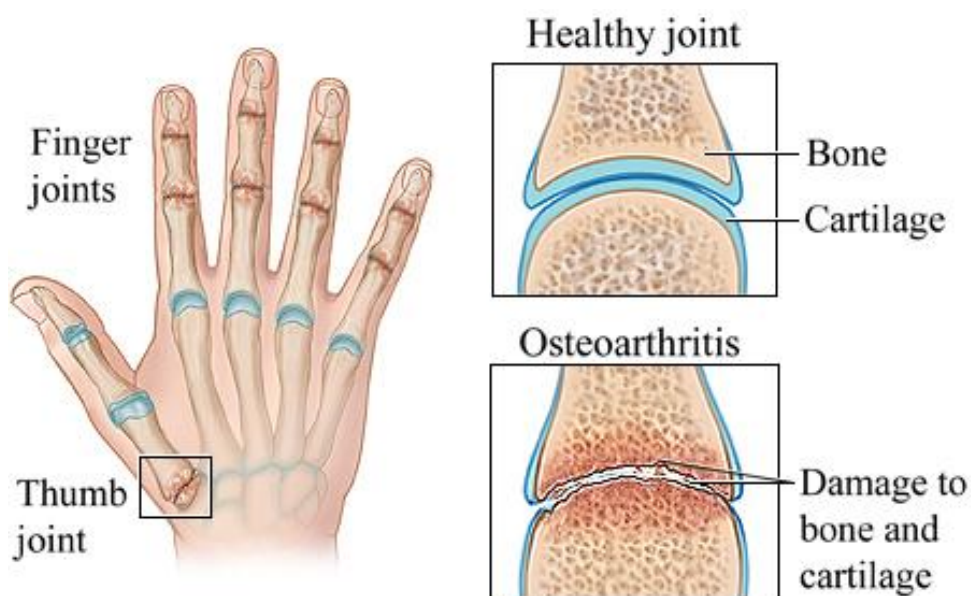


Please visit the website <https://vimeo.com/482676602> to access online the free Thumb Base Pain Education Presentation video produced by our Hand Therapy team which will give you more information about your condition and provides you with advice on how to manage it independently.

What is osteoarthritis (OA)?

Arthritis means inflammation of the joints. Osteoarthritis is the most common form of arthritis in the UK affecting up to 8.5 million people. It is caused by changes in the cartilage that cover the ends of the bone within the joint.

Normal joints are constantly undergoing repair due to the daily wear and tear that is placed on them. In osteoarthritis this process does not seem to occur correctly and changes occur. The cartilage that covers the end of the bone becomes worn. Bony growths can form around the joint edges. These are called osteophytes. The tissues surrounding the joint can become inflamed.



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How is it diagnosed?

We usually diagnose osteoarthritis of the thumb by your age, history and the symptoms you describe. Usually you do not need further tests. However a doctor may take blood tests or x-rays to rule out any other causes. For this reason repeated x-rays are not needed.

The symptoms of osteoarthritis of the thumb are:

- Pain in all the thumb joints, most commonly at the base of the thumb and sometimes into the wrist
- Stiffness or loss of movement
- Weakness in your ability to grip or hold objects and difficulty at times performing finer tasks like buttons and zips
- The joints can become swollen or misshapen and the knuckles can appear thicker.

Sometimes people can have no symptoms of this condition for a long time although x-rays can show changes. The opposite of this can also be true. An individual can have minor changes on x-ray and have severe symptoms.

What causes osteoarthritis of the thumb?

It isn't always clear but there are a number of factors that can play a role in developing OA of the thumb.

These include:

- **Age:** OA is more common with increasing age. This is due to the natural wear and tear process and the body's ability to repair becoming less as you get older
- **Genetics:** There is thought to be a link to inheriting a tendency for OA
- **Gender:** Women are more likely to develop this than men
- **Previous injury:** If you have had a previous injury or trauma to your thumb this may contribute to OA
- **Overuse of the joint:** How you use your hand is also thought to contribute. If you are continually putting pressure through these joints with your occupation, hobbies or lifestyle this can contribute to the excessive wear of the joint.

Management

Management may include an individual exercise programme, splinting, techniques to help your pain, advice and assistance on improving the functioning of your hand. This leaflet gives you advice on things you can do to improve symptoms so try the following tips for 6- 8 weeks before deciding if they have helped.

Prognosis

A diagnosis of OA does not mean that it will continue to get worse. Only 25% (1 in 4) of patients deteriorate with this condition, 25% (1 in 4) improve, and the remainder stay about the same.

Heat/ice

Some people with OA find heat can help their pain. This may involve placing a hot water bottle or heat pack over your hand or using a warm water bath. Always make sure the temperature is not too hot for your skin.

Some people with OA find ice can help their pain. This may involve placing an ice pack over your hand or using a cold water bath. Take care to avoid ice burn to your skin.

Activity modification

Respect pain

- Avoid pain during activities – stop/change activities **before** your pain starts increasing
- Use pain medication if it helps.

Balance rest and activity

- Take frequent short breaks during or in between activities
- Stop well before exhaustion. Take more breaks when your joints are inflamed
- Allow extra time for activities- avoid rushing. Perform activities more slowly
- Avoid underuse e.g. keeping the joint in one position for a long time or not using it at all
- Plan your day or week in advance. Start with the important tasks, remove unnecessary activities, and delegate tasks to others.

Reduce your effort

- Avoid carrying heavy loads; use a trolley or backpack instead of a hand held bag, divide loads. Try to buy light-weight versions of items
- Keep objects close to your body, use your larger joints and two hands to hold
- Keep items near where they are used
- Use prepared food, freeze leftovers for an easy meal later
- Push swinging doors open with the side of your body instead of your hands.

Avoid positions of deformity

- Be aware of the position of your thumb, fingers, hand and wrist and avoid activities that put strain on your painful or stiff joints
- Fingers: keep your knuckles and fingers in line when you grip so they don't drift towards your little finger
- Thumb: avoid pressing your thumb hard against the side of your index finger
- Slide heavy objects e.g. pans on kitchen counters. Use your palms rather than your fingers to lift and push.

Improve your overall physical and emotional wellbeing

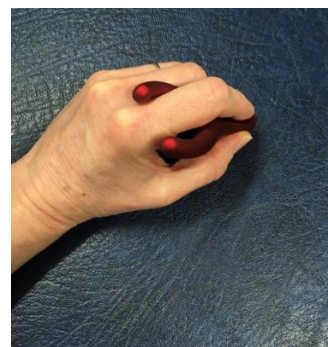
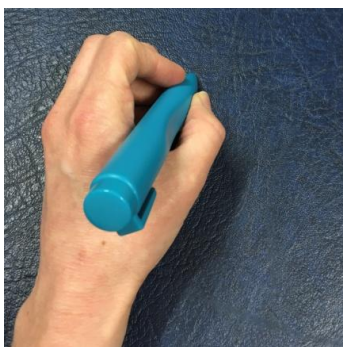
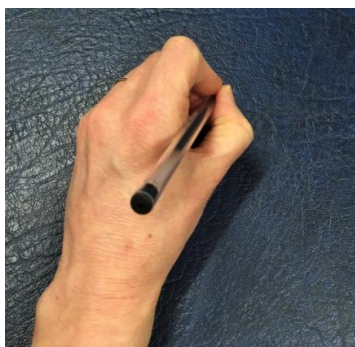
- Aerobic exercise e.g. walking, dancing, swimming pool exercise, yoga (take care with some positions)
- Healthy sleep routines, regular relaxation
- Activities that lift your mood and help you relax your mind and body.

Use labour saving gadgets and assistive equipment when necessary

- Use jar openers, a button hook, build up handles on tools and utensils
- If you have to use your hands to pull or push yourself up (e.g. to get off the toilet or out of a chair), equipment is available to help.

Holding a small pen too tightly can put pressure on the affected joint.

A wider pen or altered grip pen (such as 'Penagain') can feel more comfortable.



Try opening lids with your whole palm not just finger tips

Avoid:



Try:



Larger handles on utensils, held with the whole hand, may be more comfortable

Avoid:



Try:



Hold plates with both hands with broad grip

Avoid:



Try:



Use levers rather than twist taps. Turn taps off lightly so they are easier to use next time.

Compression gloves

Some people with OA find that compression gloves help relieve their pain and stiffness.

Medication

Anti inflammatory gel or simple pain killers can help manage symptoms. Ask your GP or Pharmacist for advice on the most appropriate medication for you.

Splints

Fabric or neoprene splints provide mild support and warmth around the joint to help reduce pain. Sometimes more than one splint is needed, when doing different activities. Splints need to provide a balance of support and comfort and should not make the pain worse. It is important to follow the manufacturer's instructions on how to use the splint. More specific information about splints is detailed in the video link

- Watch "Splints Demonstration and Explanation | Hand Osteoarthritis" on YouTube
https://youtube.com/watch?v=U_8foTx1Nbo

Relaxation and mindfulness

Mindfulness can help to reduce pain which produces a chemical response, when you are relaxed your body produces different chemicals which work as natural pain killers and anti-inflammatory chemicals. Practicing relaxation and mindfulness can be helpful so websites for this are included in the additional information section.

Steroid injections

Corticosteroid can be injected directly into the joint. This can provide a temporary pain relieving effect for some patients, usually limited to a maximum of three per joint.

Surgery

If conservative measures are not effective in managing your symptoms, surgery may be an option. This can be discussed with your hand surgeon.

Exercises

Below are examples of exercises that can help keep function in your hand but should only be performed at a pain free level.

Palm stretch: Massage the base of the thumb, gently opening out and flattening the hand. Use massage to reduce muscle tightness in the webspace area.



Stretching of the muscles at the base of the thumb: Gently draw the thumb away from the first finger.



Strengthening of the muscles at the base of the thumb: Use a small cup as a visual cue to practice opening the webspace – between your thumb and first finger.



Additional information

- 1 - Osteoarthritis Patient Information Leaflet www.patient.info
- 2 - NICE Clinical Guideline, The Care and Management of osteoarthritis in adults, January 2008
- 3 - Hunter DJ, Felson DT. Osteoarthritis. BMJ, March 2006

Useful websites

- www.patient.info
- www.versusarthritis.org
- www.nhsinform.scot
- www.bssh.ac.uk/patients/conditions/24/basal_thumb_arthritis
- www.mindfulnessscotland.org.uk
- www.mindful.org
- www.breathworks-mindfulness.org.uk
- www.nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help/tips-and-support/mindfulness

Apps

- Calm, Headspace, Buddhify, Mindfulness Association

Practical aids

- www.completecareshop.co.uk
- www.penagain.co.uk
- www.performancehealth.co.uk
- www.promedics.co.uk
- www.healthcarepro.co.uk

Other websites and aids are available

Useful OA thumb videos

- Watch "Hand exercises | Hand Osteoarthritis" on YouTube
www.youtube.com/watch?v=MKqbN_pnz8c
- Watch "House and Garden Aids | Hand Osteoarthritis" on YouTube
www.youtube.com/watch?v=j6pbNOyTRcg
- Watch "Kitchen Aids | Hand Osteoarthritis" on YouTube
www.youtube.com/watch?v=JAUN_Ans778
- Watch "Patient's Story | Hand Osteoarthritis" on YouTube
www.youtube.com/watch?v=3jhqCdkB5GQ

