

These Exercises Will Give You Strong, Pain-Free Hands

It's hard to imagine how indispensable your hands are until arthritis limits your ability to use them as you once did. The simplest things, such as turning a doorknob, using a key or opening a jar of pickles, can be intensely painful—or even impossible.

Fortunately, hand exercises can help improve strength and flexibility. Just be sure to do them in moderation—and stop when it hurts!

What most people don't realize: You can make hand exercises more fun by adding a ball, putty and other simple tools to your workouts. You can also do these exercises while you watch TV, so the program can entertain you even if the workout doesn't.

Osteoarthritis (“wear-and-tear” arthritis) and rheumatoid arthritis (an autoimmune disease) can strike any joint in the body, but when the hands are affected, our day-to-day tasks become difficult. **Examples:** An inability to grasp small objects (such as dropped coins or earrings)...or lift or carry more than 10 pounds (such as grocery store purchases).

The *carpometacarpal* (CMC) *joint* in the thumb is often one of the affected joints, particularly in older women. Stiffness and pain of the CMC joint makes *any* kind of gripping difficult.

Self-test: Hold up your hand with the palm facing you. Can you touch the tip of your thumb to each fingertip...and bring the thumb to the base of the little finger? Also, can you make a fist and touch each fingertip to your palm? If you can't—or if you struggle with any of the activities described above—you might benefit from hand exercises.

In conventional workouts, people are often advised to do many repetitions for each exercise. This might not be advisable for people with hand pain. High-repetition exercises can strain tendons and cause overuse injuries.

Muscles work and become stronger during both isometric (holding) exercises and repetitive movements, but holding exercises are less stressful to arthritic joints.

Important: The exercises in this article are helpful for a variety of hand symptoms and conditions, but anyone with significant hand limitations should work with an occupational or a physical therapist, preferably with the additional credential of certified hand therapist (CHT). You can find a CHT in your area by going to HTCC.org and clicking on “Find a CHT.”

What you will need: For the exercises described below, you will need the following items—a hand therapy ball...a small piece of sponge (about the size of a golf ball) or a cotton ball...a rubber band...and hand therapy putty. Sets that include soft, medium and firm balls or putty are available online for about \$12 each. Start with soft!

Stretch first: Before using any resistance, start with a few stretches to maximize your flexibility.

Examples: Stretch your thumb gently away from the side of your hand, then toward the bottom of your little finger...make a full fist...then spread your fingers all the way apart. Repeat on the other hand. Do these stretches a few times each.

READY, SET...GO!

Do each exercise below for 10 seconds (extend the time to 20, then 30 seconds as your hands get stronger). Relax your hands for a few seconds, then repeat. Continue this cycle for a total of

about one minute for each exercise on each hand. You can increase the time *gradually* to up to three minutes. If you can, do each exercise daily.

- **Ball squeezes.** This exercise can increase overall hand strength, but *don't overdo it*. Squeezing the ball too often—or too hard—can lead to “trigger finger” (*stenosing tenosynovitis*), in which a finger gets stuck in a bent position. Stop the exercise if it's painful! *What to do:* Hold a ball in your palm...squeeze it with your thumb and fingers...then relax. If your hands are weak or painful, be sure to start with a soft ball. As you improve, you can progress to a harder ball or even a tennis ball. Let your hand be your guide for timing the progression.
- **Scissor squeeze.** This exercise strengthens muscles between the fingers (known as intrinsic muscles). It can help to improve grip strength and is unlikely to cause overuse injuries. *What to do:* Simply squeeze a piece of sponge or a cotton ball between two fingers. Hold the item between the index and middle finger, then between the middle and ring finger, then between the ring and small finger. Try to keep the little joints of your fingers straight as you do this.
- **Thumb roll.** This simple exercise can increase thumb mobility and improve your ability to grip things. *What to do:* Place a ball in the palm of your hand. Using just your thumb, roll the ball from side to side...and in a circular motion.
- **Finger flicks.** The finger muscles are small, so this easy movement does strengthen them. *What to do:* Place a ball on a table in front of your loosely closed fist. Flick the ball away from you with the back of each fingertip (by straightening the fingers), and repeat with your other hand. If you're doing it with a partner, he/she can flick it right back. Stop before you get tired. If you are alone, catch the ball with your other hand.
- **Finger spread.** This exercise improves finger range of motion, which helps with holding large objects, etc. *What to do:* With your hand held in front of you, place a rubber band around your thumb and all your fingertips. Spread your fingers out to stretch the rubber band...hold...relax...then repeat.
- **Squeeze, roll, spread and pinch.** This exercise combines flexion, extension and “pinch” movements. *What to do:* Mold the putty into a ball. Then roll out the putty with your palm into a cylinder. Next shape the putty into a circle on a table. Place your fingertips inside the circle and stretch it out with your thumb/fingers. You can lift the putty off the table to spread your fingers. Now mold the putty into a ball again and pinch it using a “three-point pinch”—that is, use the tips of your thumb, index and middle fingers. People with hand arthritis should try to limit their use of a “lateral pinch,” in which they pinch with the thumb against the side of the index finger (as though holding a key). This type of pinch pattern can irritate the thumb's CMC joint. When possible, use a three-point pinch—it helps to protect the CMC joint.

Source: Mary Formby, OT, CHT, a certified hand therapist at the Curtis National Hand Center at MedStar Union Memorial Hospital in Baltimore. She has practiced hand rehabilitation medicine for more than 25 years and was a contributor to the textbook *Hand and Upper Extremity Rehabilitation*. CurtisHand.com

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