

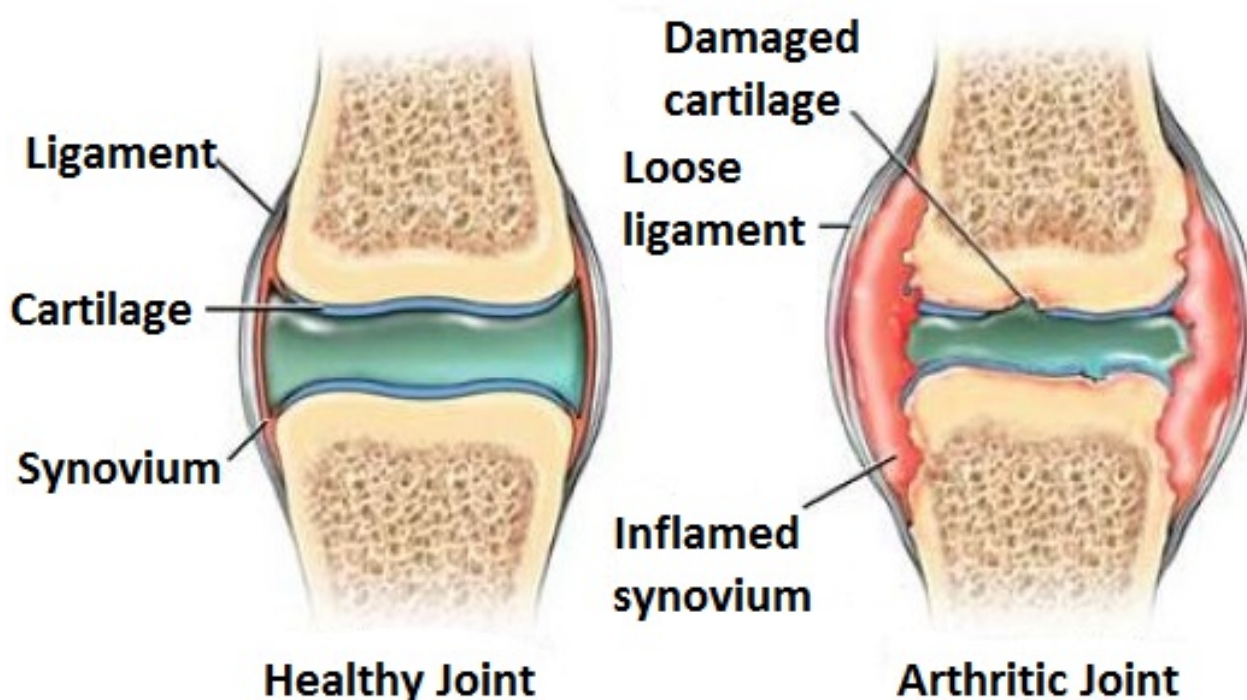
Joint protection techniques for hand/finger arthritis

Information for patients

This leaflet explains how to use your hands to do daily tasks and activities without causing unnecessary strain or pain on your finger joints. Protecting your joints does **not** mean avoiding using them. If you have any queries or concerns, please do not hesitate to ask your therapist.

How does arthritis affect my joints?

This picture shows the difference between a healthy finger joint (left) and one with arthritis (right). With arthritis, the cartilage that helps protect the end of your joints becomes damaged. The ligaments that keep your joint in place and stable become loose. The synovium, which cushions your cartilage and prevents friction, becomes inflamed. Together these can cause pain and stiffness when trying to use the affected joint.



How do I protect my joints?

There are six basic rules for protecting your joints.

1. Respect pain.
2. Use larger, stronger joints.
3. Reduce the effort and force.
4. Balance rest and activity.
5. Exercise in a pain-free range.
6. Avoid 'positions of deformity'.

1 Respect Pain

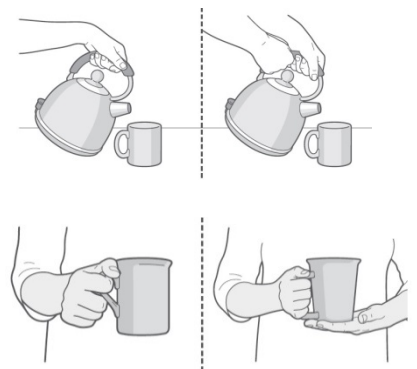
- Stop doing an activity before you get discomfort.
 - It is important to take notice of pain and use it as a warning sign. Pushing yourself to complete a task can cause more pain the next day.
 - Pace yourself. This allows you to keep doing activities you enjoy, rather than having to give them up.
 - Work out your pain threshold. How long can you do an activity before you feel pain?
- Avoid or do less of the activities that cause pain that lasts for more than one - two hours.
 - Change activities or take a break before you get discomfort rather than getting to this point before stopping. For example, if you get pain after doing something for five minutes, try to take a break after three minutes.
- Wear splints to help support and rest painful joints.

2 Use larger, stronger joints

- Slide heavy objects on kitchen tops rather than picking them up.
- Use your palms instead of your fingers to lift or push.
- Use your hip or shoulder instead of your hand to close drawers and doors.
- Carry a backpack instead of holding a purse in your hand, or carry bags on your forearm.



- Keep small items close to your body and try to spread the load over several joints.
 - Use two hands and avoid gripping with your thumb.
 - Keep as much of your hand as possible in contact with the object.



- Hug bigger objects close to your body so the weight is supported by larger, stronger joints.



3 Reduce the effort and force

- As much as possible, **ask for help**.
- Use appliances and assistive devices. Labour-saving devices can help make day-to-day tasks easier by reducing the strain on your joints.
- Keep items near where you use them so you have an easy flow of work.
- Use prepared foods and freeze leftovers for an easy meal.
- Avoid low chairs or beds.
- Keep a healthy body weight.
- Try not to keep going up and down stairs – complete work on each floor.
- Take frequent breaks when doing activities and spend less time doing them.
- Try to relax your grip as much as possible and use padding to build up a grip and ease pressure on small joints.



4 Balance rest and activity

Once you have worked out your pain threshold, use this as a guide to manage your work and rest breaks.

Many people give up an activity if it causes them pain, but it is better to do a little at a time with plenty of rests rather than no longer doing something you enjoy.

- Rest before you get tired out.
- Take frequent short breaks.
- Avoid doing activities where you cannot take a break.
- Avoid staying in one position for a long time.
- Alternate between heavy and light activities.
- Take more breaks when you are getting inflammation.
- Allow extra time for activities to avoid rushing.
- Plan your day ahead of time.
- Cut out activities you do not need to do.

How to break up your activities

1. Wash five plates.
2. Then fold some clothes.
3. Wash five more plates.
4. Make yourself a cup of tea.
5. Finish doing the washing

5 Exercise in a pain-free range

Your therapist will give you some exercises to help with your specific pain and joint deformities.

Protecting your joints and doing exercise work together. The former reduces strain on your joints while the latter strengthens the muscles that support them.

By making the muscles around your joints stronger, helping to support them, you are less likely to develop deformities. Exercise also helps you to maintain your range of movement. If you do not move your joints, they can stiffen and your muscles can waste away.

Exercise tips

- Try doing hand exercises in warm water as this can help relax your hands, make the exercises easier to do and also help to reduce pain.
- Balance rest and exercise.
- Do not do strengthening exercises when you have a flare-up.
- If you get any pain that lasts longer than one hour after exercise, it means the exercise is too stressful. Do not do it again until it is reviewed by your therapist.

6 Avoid 'positions of deformity'

Rheumatoid arthritis or osteoarthritis can cause various deformities in your finger joints. If you notice early that any of your joints are becoming misshapen, change the way you do things to reduce the strain on them.

- Try to become aware of how you use the joints that ache.
For example, think about what is happening to your fingers when using a tap. Are they being pushed towards your little finger? Try to correct this by turning the tap on with one hand and off with the other, always pushing towards the thumb.
- Use stable joint positions – keep your thumb and index in an 'O' position and wrist straight – as shown in image.
- Make sure work surfaces are at the right height for you so you do not have to stoop or stretch when you use them.



The four Ps of protecting your finger joints

- **Problem solve:** If a task causes you pain or discomfort, think about how you can do it differently.
 - **Plan:** Plan the things you need to do for that day/week and try to space out the more demanding tasks.
 - **Prioritise:** Decide whether something needs to be done today; done at all; or can be done partly or wholly by someone else.
- Pace yourself:** Break tasks up and spread them throughout the day or week with regular short rest breaks. Change positions regularly

Who can I contact with queries or concerns?

If you have any queries, contact the Trust's Hand Therapy service, Monday to Friday, 9am - 4pm (not bank holidays).

King's College Hospital, tel: 020 3299 8220

Beckenham Beacon, tel: 01689 866 660

More information

Arthritis Research UK: www.arthritisresearchuk.org

Disabled Living Foundation: www.dlf.org.uk

Assist UK: www.assist-uk.org

PALS

The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) offer support, a wide variety of information and advice to patients, carers and visitors. They can help to sort out problems or concerns through liaison with hospital staff. They can also guide people to the hospital complaints process or to external independent advocacy services if more appropriate. Any views or comments about experience of the hospital services are warmly welcomed and will be used to help improve and develop future services.

King's College Hospital site

Tel: 020 3299 3601

Email: kch-tr.pals@nhs.net

Princess Royal University Hospital and southern sites

This covers The Princess Royal Hospital, Orpington Hospital, Beckenham Beacon, Queen Mary's Hospital and Sidcup sites.

Tel: 01689 863252

Email: kch-tr.palskent@nhs.net

If you would like the information in this leaflet in a different language or format, please contact PALS on 020 3299 1844.