

Hand Therapy

Joint Management for Arthritis

What is joint management?

The aim of joint management is to teach you on how to use your hands in a way that will help to reduce pain and flare ups. This will reduce further problems with your joints and the surrounding structures.

When a joint is swollen or inflamed, these structures can become stretched, and this allows more movement than is normal. It is unwise to put added stress on these joints as this will cause further instability and reduced hand function.

Even on your bad days, you should continue with the gentle hand exercise programme advised by your therapist, but at a reduced intensity. This will ensure that you maintain your range of movement without worsening your symptoms.

Joint management means that you will have to change behaviour patterns or habits. This will be useful in the long term as this will reduce pain and help keep your hands working for as long possible.

Principles

1. Spread the load and the force through as many joints as possible

When picking things up, scoop them up in your palms. This uses your wrists and part of the forearm to help support the load and force.

Examples: holding a tray, a book, or packages.

Slide objects whenever this is practical, to transport them; palms face



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down on the object or to the side of the object to push it along. Examples: polishing or dusting with a cloth, slide pots and pans across the stove and counter to the sink, use a trolley to transport items.

2. Use the strongest and/or largest joint possible to do the task

Examples: carry shopping over your forearm instead of hooked into your fingers, open a door by pushing with your shoulder/ elbow instead of your hand, use both arms to carry. By doing so you will not stress single joints or weaker areas of your body.

3. Add leverage to reduce the force required to operate them

Examples: lengthen the lever of the can opener, lever taps, and assistive devices like electric jar openers and can openers, larger key fobs. There are many assistive devices which will help you accomplish tasks that are otherwise difficult and painful. Ask your therapist for further details.

4. Avoid static positions and gripping too tightly

Try not to hold objects any tighter than necessary. A tight grasp increases forces across the joints and structures which will increase pain, joint stiffness and drifting of the fingers. Staying in the same position for a long time can cause joints to stiffen and become painful. You should change positions as often as possible so you can protect your joints.

5. Avoid diagonal forces on the hand wherever possible.

For instance, do not carry a mug at the handle, carry it from the side or with 2 hands; do not carry a pan in one hand, use 2 hands or slide it across the counter.

6. Respect your pain

It is important to not disregard your pain. If you experience pain during the activity, then stop and take a break. If pain continues for an hour or so after the activity, then there has been too much stress and load applied through your joints. Avoid excessive pressure on the small joints of the hand. For example, if opening a water bottle is painful, don't force your hand. Consider getting a bottle opener that works or having someone else open it for you.

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7. Plan, Problem Solve and Pace

To reduce levels of pain and fatigue, plan your day with periods of rest and activity. When your body signals that it has had enough, schedule a period of rest. By balancing activity and rest, you will ultimately be able to do more, though it might take longer. Try to organise your day so you are not static for too long. Prolonged inactivity and immobility will cause stiffness and increased pain. Delegate heavier tasks if you can. Prioritise what needs to be done and break the task down into smaller chunks. Tasks will take a bit longer and may require a bit more planning. This will help with your pain and fatigue levels, thereby allowing you to better manage your condition.

If you feel you would like more advice on joint management, please ask your consultant or therapist for a referral with an occupational therapist.

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