

Osteoarthritis of the thumb

Information and advice

This information is designed to supplement the advice given by your doctor, and is written by physiotherapists based on the latest medical advice.

What is osteoarthritis?

Osteoarthritis is an extension of the body's repair process, which takes place in joints which are stressed or injured. It affects different people in different ways, but more often it's a slow process that develops over many years. The cartilage is damaged and new bone can be formed. Sometimes, but not always, it can cause pain and stiffness. Symptoms don't always correlate with x-ray findings. The thumb carpometacarpal joint is the most commonly affected in the hand and it is more common in women.

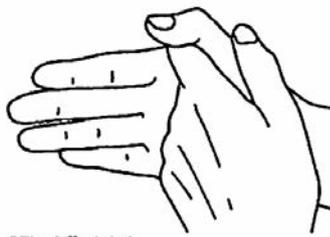
Symptoms:

- Pain in the main thumb joint especially with pinching and gripping activities
- Stiffness after rest
- Swelling or deformity may be present
- Hand function can be impaired.

Treatment:

- Applying warmth or cold to your thumb can relieve pain. Heat lamps, wheat bags, hot-water bottles or heat pads are effective for warmth. For cold, try an ice pack or bag of frozen peas wrapped in a damp towel applied to the area for 10-20 minutes. Please do not do this if your skin sensation is impaired. Never apply ice directly to the skin as it can cause burns.
- Medication can be taken to help ease the pain and inflammation. Ask your GP or local pharmacist for advice.
- Weakness can develop due to pain and disuse so it is important to exercise your thumb and hand muscles to give the joint some support.
- Range of movement exercises help keep the joint mobile.
- A thumb splint can give support for painful tasks.
- Altering the way you use your hand can help and tools or aids can be helpful, for example jar openers or kettle tipplers.
- Pace all activities - don't tackle all the physical jobs at once. Break the harder jobs up into chunks and do something gentler in between.

Exercises:



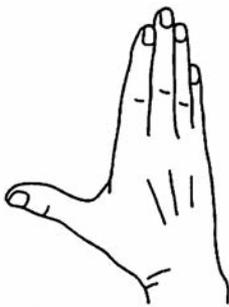
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Support the base of your thumb and bend and straighten the end joint five to 10 times, three times a day



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Dig your thumb into a stress ball or putty and make sure you keep an O shape and don't let the large joint collapse. Hold for up to five minutes, one to two times a day



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Take your thumb away from your index finger.



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Make an O shape and take your thumb to each fingertip starting from the index to the little and then run it down the little finger five to 10 times, three times a day

If you feel the exercises are making your pain worse, reduce the number or frequency of the exercises or stop and seek advice.



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