

Patient information

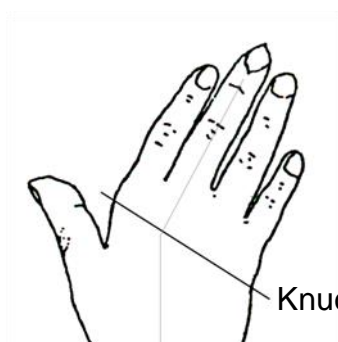
Joint Protection

Therapies Department

How does rheumatoid arthritis damage the joints of the hands?

The flare-ups of rheumatoid arthritis cause the joints to swell. This swelling stretches the tendons and ligaments holding the joints together. Repeated stretching makes these tendons and ligaments less taut; they become slacker. This means that the bones are more likely to move into abnormal positions.

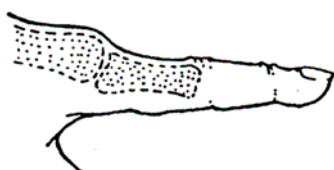
These are some of the joint changes that can happen in rheumatoid arthritis.



Ulnar drift – the fingers move over (drift) towards the little finger.



Swan neck – the tip of the finger is bent downwards, while the middle joint is bent backwards/inwards.



Subluxation – e.g. of the knuckles, the fingers appear to drop down from the knuckles.

What does joint protection aim to do?

- To make you more aware of positions and activities that are likely to encourage joint changes– so that you can try to avoid these positions.
- To show better ways of doing things so you can take care of your own hands.
- To prevent the pain and inflammation that can be caused by excessive strain on small joints.

Basically, it's not what you do, it's the way you do it...

So how do I protect the joints in my hands?

These are the general guidelines:

- Balance rest and work.
- Use the largest joint possible.
- Where possible, distribute the strain over several joints.
- Prevent deforming positions.
- Avoid strong tight grips.
- Avoid a prolonged grip where your hand stays in one position.
- Avoid jarring your joints.
- Use equipment to take strain off your joints.

Let us take each guideline separately and look at some examples.

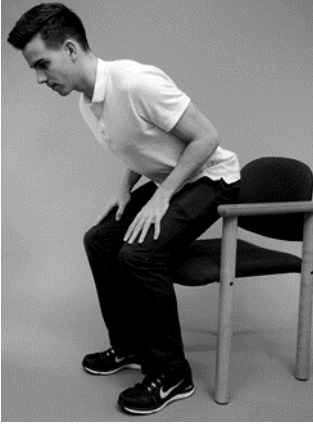
Balance rest and work

This means altering how you tackle everything. Sit down to do jobs where possible. Take frequent rest during all activities. Rest before you feel tired. Remember, several short rests are better than one long rest.

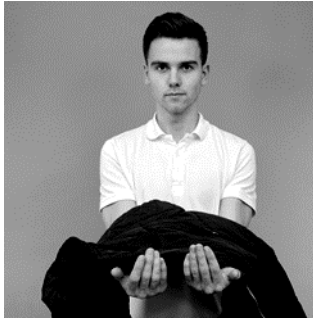
Use the largest joint possible when sitting to standing from a chair.



When pushing up from a chair avoid using the knuckles and wrist.



Instead push up from your forearms or rock forwards using your leg muscles



Carrying

Avoid carrying with one single finger as there is too much strain on one joint.

Instead use one or both forearms.



Handbags can be heavy, let your shoulders take the weight.

Distribute the strain over several joints.



Don't lift pans with one hand, this could contribute to ulnar drift and wrist strain.

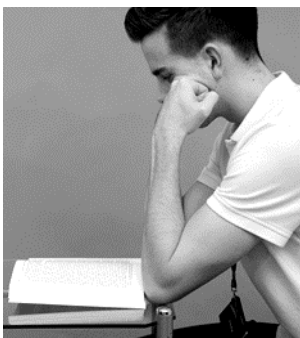
Instead lift and slide pans to distribute the load. Better still use a chip basket or a strainer spoon to drain vegetables or cook in a microwave using lightweight containers.



Carrying plates and trays can aggravate wrist strain, thumb strain and increase the risk of swan neck deformity. Instead use flat palms or forearms to take the weight or use a trolley.

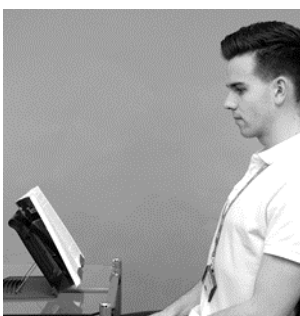


Avoiding deforming positions



Leaning head on knuckles

This pushes the fingers in an ulnar direction (towards the little finger) and puts a strain on the wrist.



Holding a book

The weight of the book pushes the fingers down in an ulnar direction encouraging ulnar drift.

Instead use a book rest.



Cleaning inside cups

Fingers turn in an ulnar direction.

Instead make an effort to turn your hand toward the thumb when washing up or dusting.



Holding cups/mugs

This can increase the risk of ulnar drift and swan neck deformities.



Instead try using a cup with a larger handle or the other hand.

Avoid strong tight grips



This can strain your thumb and increases the risk of ulnar drift.

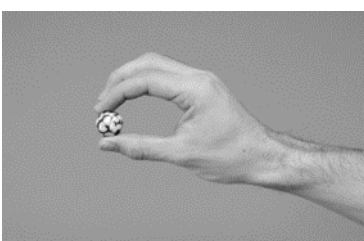
Instead use both hands on the lid (distributing the load) and stop the jar slipping by use of assistive device as recommended by your occupational therapist (OT).



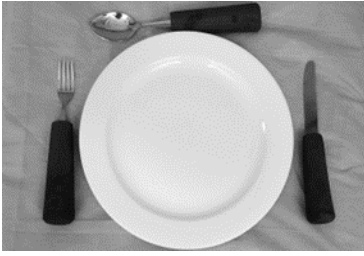
Wringing out a cloth uses a lot of power in a tight grip. **Instead** wrap it around a tap and twist with two hands.

Avoid prolonged grip in one position.

Many activities, such as using cutlery, writing and knitting, put a lot of pressure on the fingers, thumbs and knuckles. The smaller and tighter the grip, the greater the force on the joints. To prevent the strain, do these activities in small doses.



Using a large or wide grip requires little force. Gripping small objects places three times the force on the knuckle and palm.



Alternatively, enlarge the handle or object that you have to grip. This reduces the pressure applied through your joints.

Avoid jarring your joints.

Any activity that regularly knocks and jolts your hands, hammering, sawing, batting should be avoided.

Use equipment to help you.



A carving/slicing knife with an upright handle is much less painful to use. It makes cutting into a 'whole arm' action thus reducing the strain on several joints in the hand.



Trying to open packets with force strains the thumb and first finger. Instead use Easigrip scissors.



Lever taps or lightweight tap turners reduce the strain on fingers, thumbs and wrist. Your occupational therapist (OT) can show you various pieces of equipment.

Electrical items, mixers, knives, steamers, air fryers, tin openers and microwaves make life easier, but try before you buy.

Finally

It will take time to re-educate yourself in joint protection techniques. Check with your occupational therapist (OT) if you are not sure about any of the techniques mentioned here. Get into the habit of thinking carefully before you use your joints.

Remember, it's not what you do, it's the way that you do it.

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Further information

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