



**Arthritis NZ**  
Mateponapona  
Aotearoa

# Living well with arthritis

## Top tips for managing arthritis in your hands

Arthritis in the hands presents with painful joints, swelling, difficulty with movement, and limited function, like being unable to grip properly. Clinical interventions aim to reduce pain, control swelling, improve range of motion and improve the function of the hand, like gripping.

### Precautions

As with all exercise advice for people with arthritis – always work within your comfort level and do not force any movements. No one can tell you how often or how long you should do any exercise. Your arthritis pain and discomfort is unique to you, and you will need to find your balance.

Remember, a key thing to help you find your balance is: **Too much exercise causes pain, too little exercise cause stiffness.** Trial different exercises for different periods and find your balance.

### Remember

- Protect joints whenever possible during loading, with splints or aids
- Rest joints regularly, at night is easiest
- Joints need the full range of motion exercises every day
- Strengthen joint stabiliser muscles by doing the gentle exercises

Think about what load and stress goes through your hands when doing your favourite activities and then find ways to minimise force and load so that you can get on with life.

### Hand exercises

#### Tendon gliding or “tai chi for fingers”

Start with your fingers together and your hand pointing up. Bend the tips of your fingers towards the floor, then carry on and make a fist, then let the tips of your fingers and your thumb relax into a straight position. Keep the motions smooth and do them without straining. This exercise gives the joints in your hands a full range of motion exercise. Do this about ten times per day. Contraction and relaxation to move the fluids that cause swelling in our joints. Try the exercises on this factsheet.



### Thumb opposition

Make the letter 'O' by touching your thumb to each fingertip, one at a time. Make the circle as round as you can. Repeat ten times if comfortable.



### Finger Extension

Place your palm flat on a table and then raise each finger one by one. Repeat ten times if comfortable.



## When to contact a health professional

**Cold treatment** – when something is acutely inflamed, apply cold or ice to it. The bones in the hand are close to the skin so you should make sure there is a fabric material (cotton or similar) barrier between the ice and the skin.

**Compression** – there is a limit to applying compression. It needs to be a comfortable level of compression. Wrapping a joint too tightly will cause more pain, compression should support the joint and feel like the pain is easing. You can use compression gloves, thermal gloves, and even bandaging to compress a painful joint.

**Gentle exercise and stretching** – the body removes swelling passively, not actively. Our lymphatic system relies on muscle contraction and relaxation to move the fluids that cause swelling in our joints. Try the exercises on this factsheet.

**Rest Splints** – use as prescribed or recommended by your health care professional.

**Warmth and Massage** can also be useful to improve circulation and reduce aching –

- Try doing the hand exercises with your hands in warm water
- Use any rub-on or cream you have and massage your hands gently
- Use a wheat bag or hot water bottle for extra warmth

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and find support**



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