

# Hand Osteoarthritis (OA)

## Patient Information Leaflet

MSK Musculoskeletal Physiotherapy Service



View our other **MSK Physiotherapy** resources

[www.leicspart.nhs.uk/msk-physiotherapy-resources-getting-started/](http://www.leicspart.nhs.uk/msk-physiotherapy-resources-getting-started/)

## What is osteoarthritis?

Osteoarthritis (OA) is a condition that can cause pain and stiffness in the joints. It can affect any joint in the body. The joints most commonly affected are the knees, hips, back, feet and hands.

Cartilage is a coating of tough but smooth and slippery tissue that cushions the ends of the bones. This helps the joint to move freely.

Over time, this layer can start to thin or roughen. When this happens, the body goes through a repair process. Small bony growths (osteophytes) may develop around the joint. Fluid can also build up inside. This reduces the space within the joint, which may make the joint feel stiff and not move as smoothly.

## Symptoms of osteoarthritis

You may notice:

### **Pain**

Pain is often worse when using the joint. The pain can come and go.

### **Stiffness**

Often stiffness is worse after rest, especially in the morning. It usually improves once you start moving.

### **Swelling**

This may feel hard (extra bone) or soft (fluid).

### **Clicking or cracking (crepitus)**

This may feel strange but does not usually mean damage is happening.

### **Loss of Function**

It may become harder to do everyday tasks such as opening jars.

### **Deformity**

The area of your hand affected may start to look different.

## **Why does it happen?**

We do not know exactly what causes osteoarthritis.

Things that increase your risk include:

- previous injury or surgery on a joint
- being overweight
- joint conditions from birth or childhood
- family history (genetics)
- other joint conditions (like gout)

## **Do I need an X-ray?**

You usually do **not** need an X-ray or scan.

X-rays do not always match how much pain you feel.

Current guidelines for osteoarthritis recommend a diagnosis is made based on your symptoms and do **not** recommend routine X-rays or scans.

These guidelines recommend that a diagnosis of osteoarthritis can be made if:

- you are aged 45 or over
- you have joint pain with activity
- you have no morning stiffness or morning stiffness that lasts less than 30 minutes

The current guidelines are linked in the 'Helpful Resources' section at the end of this leaflet.

## Treatment

There are many ways to manage osteoarthritis without surgery. Current guidelines tell us that the most helpful treatments are exercise and weight management.

### Exercise

Exercise is one of the best ways to help your joints. Some people worry it will make things worse, but too much rest can increase pain and stiffness. Regular movement helps joints stay healthy.

Exercise should include:

- Aerobic exercise (like walking or cycling)
- Strength exercises (to build muscle)

Guidelines suggest:

- A minimum of 150 minutes of moderate-intensity activity per week: something that raises your heart rate and gets you breathing more heavily
- Strength exercises twice a week

People with osteoarthritis may experience an increase in joint pain and soreness when they start new exercise. Despite this, doing regular and consistent exercise is safe and will be beneficial for the joints in the long term.

# Exercises

The following exercises can help improve the strength and flexibility of the muscles around your hand.

## Strength

### Exercises to improve strength

aim to repeat each exercise **up to 10 times**

**rest** between sets

gradually build up to **3 sets of 10 repetitions**

#### 1. Ball Squeeze

Squeeze a small ball in your hand.

You can also use putty, a small towel, or other small squeezezy items.

Watch the video here:

<https://youtu.be/EMx8Ufccvik>



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## 2. Finger Thumb Isometric Extension

Place your finger and thumb of your non-affected hand on the outside of your affected finger and thumb.

Resist up and down against your finger and thumb.

Slowly relax.



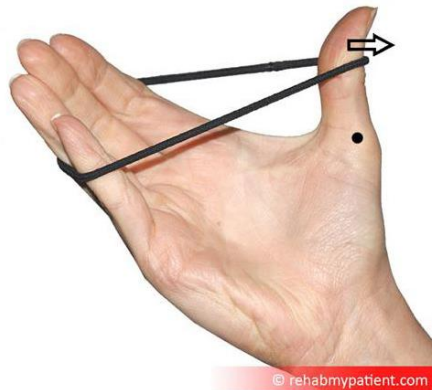
Watch the video here: <https://youtu.be/rqMM9X8vDU8>

## 3. Thumb Extension with Band

Place an elastic band (or hair tie) around your fingers and thumb.

Move your thumb away from your fingers against the resistance of the band.

Slowly relax.



Watch the video here: <https://youtu.be/0me9b2Kjkbc>

## 4. Abduction with Band

Wrap an elastic band (or hair tie) around your fingers and thumb.

Pull your fingers and thumb apart from each other, against the resistance of the band.

Slowly relax.



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Watch the video here: <https://youtu.be/5kp45nPJxa8>

## 5. Wrist Extension with Weight

Wrap an elastic band around your fingers and thumb.

Pull your fingers and thumb apart from each other, against the resistance of the band.

Slowly relax.

Watch the video here:

<https://youtu.be/eOYwu-dHAD4>



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# Flexibility

## Exercises to improve flexibility

hold these stretches for **up to 10 to 30 seconds**

repeat up to **3 times**

### 1. Thumb Stretch

Keeping your fingers straight, reach with your thumb towards the base of your little finger.

Watch the video here:

<https://youtu.be/Xx0dkEDWDW4>



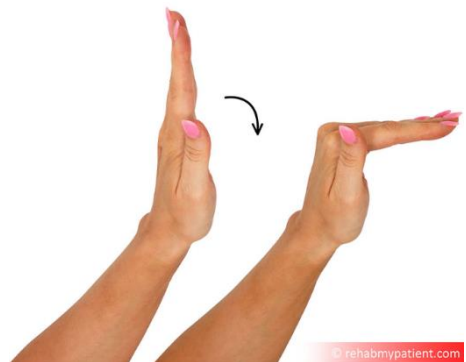
### 2. Duck Finger Flexion

Fingers straight. Bend your fingers at your large knuckles, while keeping your fingers straight.

Return to the start position.

Watch the video here:

[https://youtu.be/pt\\_eWlhsawY](https://youtu.be/pt_eWlhsawY)



### 3. Hook Fist

Fingers straight.

Bend the ends of your fingers as if you were making a hook, bringing your fingertips down to the top of your palm.

Return to the start position.

Watch the video here:

<https://youtu.be/nR37GnHosCo>



### 4. Making a Fist Abduction

Tuck your fingers in, towards your palm.

Wrap your thumb over your fingers. Squeeze towards your palm.

Release to straight wide fingers and thumb as you try to separate them as far as possible.



Watch the video here: <https://youtu.be/VwOnCTk8Y4g>

## Weight Management

Guidelines recommend weight loss for people with osteoarthritis who are living with overweight or obesity.

Carrying excess body weight leads to greater forces through the joints. Obesity may also increase pain because body fat produces chemicals that can contribute to inflammation.

Weight loss can:

- reduce symptoms of osteoarthritis
- improve function and quality of life
- slow symptoms getting worse

Even small weight loss can make a difference.

A healthy, balanced diet is recommended. There isn't a specific diet that is proven to help with osteoarthritis.

In most cases, there is little evidence to support that supplements and herbal remedies can improve osteoarthritis or its symptoms, but people may feel they do benefit from them.

For more information on eating well and to support weight management visit [www.leicestershirewms.co.uk/](http://www.leicestershirewms.co.uk/)

## **Pain Relief**

You can try using heat or ice to help ease the symptoms.

Medication in the form of tablets, prescribed by your doctor or pharmacist, may also help. In some cases, an injection can be helpful.

These may only help in the short term.

## **Pacing Activities**

Break tasks, such as large amounts of housework or gardening, into smaller more manageable chunks. Avoid doing too much at once where possible.

As you continue to exercise and gradually build your activity, your strength and fitness will improve, and it is likely that you will then be able to do more of the activity before your pain comes on.

## **How will osteoarthritis affect me?**

Osteoarthritis affects everyone differently. For most people, it does not get steadily worse over time.

Symptoms may come and go. You may have flare-ups, where your pain increases for a few days or weeks then settles down again. This is a common feature of osteoarthritis.

Flare-ups can be caused by:

- doing too much (e.g. an unusually long walk)
- an injury (such as a fall)
- stress
- weight gain
- a combination of factors

Sometimes there is no clear reason as to why the symptoms have flared up.

Managing flare-ups well can help you return quickly to the activities that matter to you.

## Tips to manage a flare-up of symptoms

**Remember:** flare-ups are temporary.

**Manage your symptoms:** consider the use of pain relief or other strategies such as heat, ice, gentle exercises, or relaxed breathing.

**Avoid complete rest:** ease off activities during the first few days as needed. Try not to rest too much. Complete rest can make your joints stiffer and weaker.

**Pace your activity:** it may be necessary to temporarily adjust your activity levels. Break activities into smaller tasks.

**Set yourself a goal:** small, simple and achievable goals.

**Make a flare-up plan:** making a flare-up plan can be a useful reminder for things that you find helpful. Having a plan can help you feel more in control of your symptoms.

## When should I seek further help?

Speak to a GP or physiotherapist if:

- your symptoms are getting worse
- pain is significantly affecting your daily life

Surgery (for joint replacement) may be an option for osteoarthritis but is not always required.

## Remember

Exercise is one of the best treatments.

Managing your weight can help.

Osteoarthritis does not always get worse.

Staying active can reduce pain and improve your quality of life.

Surgery is not always needed.

# Helpful Resources

## LPT MSK Physiotherapy Videos

Part One: Understanding Osteoarthritis

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=2kzalpiTSoo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2kzalpiTSoo)

Part Two: Managing Osteoarthritis

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=c27bFJjrJMY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c27bFJjrJMY)

## ESCAPE–Pain

A free nationally recognised, evidence-based education & exercise programme

<https://escape-pain.org/support-tools-2/>

## Versus Arthritis

[www.arthritis-uk.org/information-and-support/understanding-arthritis/conditions/osteoarthritis/](http://www.arthritis-uk.org/information-and-support/understanding-arthritis/conditions/osteoarthritis/)

## NICE Guidelines for Osteoarthritis

[www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng226](http://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng226)

## Eating Well and/or Weight Management

[www.leicestershirewms.co.uk/](http://www.leicestershirewms.co.uk/)

## Acknowledgements



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## MSK Physiotherapy Service

Find out more about the MSK Physiotherapy Service and what we offer

[www.leicspart.nhs.uk/service/musculoskeletal-msk-therapy-physiotherapy/](http://www.leicspart.nhs.uk/service/musculoskeletal-msk-therapy-physiotherapy/)



## Further Resources

Access our other MSK Physiotherapy resources [www.leicspart.nhs.uk/msk-physiotherapy-resources-getting-started/](http://www.leicspart.nhs.uk/msk-physiotherapy-resources-getting-started/)

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