



Osteoarthritis of the Hand

What you need to know about your condition

This handout describes the cause, symptoms, diagnosis, and treatment of osteoarthritis of the hand.

Osteoarthritis is a degenerative joint disease in which the cushioning cartilage that covers the bone surfaces at the joints begins to wear out.

Cause of Osteoarthritis of the Hand

Osteoarthritis is caused by simple wear and tear on joints. It may also develop after an injury to a joint. It often develops at the base of the thumb, where the thumb and wrist come together, at the end joint closest to the finger tip, and at the middle joint of a finger.

Signs and Symptoms

Stiffness, swelling, and pain are symptoms common to all forms of arthritis in the hand. In osteoarthritis, bony nodules may develop at the middle joint of the finger and at the end joints of the finger. Grip and pinch strength may be affected, causing difficulty with activities such as opening jars or turning keys.

Diagnosis

Your doctor will examine you and determine whether you have similar symptoms in other joints. X-rays will also show certain signs of osteoarthritis, such as narrowing of the joint space, the formation of bony outgrowths (osteophytes or bone spurs), and the development of dense, hard areas of bone along the joint margins.

Treatments

Non-Surgical

- Anti-inflammatory or other pain medications may help relieve pain.
- Brief periods of rest may help if the arthritis has flared up.
- You may be advised to wear a finger or wrist splint at night or for some activities.

Questions?

Call 206-598-4263

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or health care provider if you have questions or concerns. UWMC clinic staff are also available to help at any time during clinic hours.

UWMC Hand Center:
206-598-HAND

- Keeping your fingers moving and using your hand whenever possible will likely help.
- Hand therapy is often helpful.
- Sometimes a cortisone injection can provide temporary relief of symptoms. Cortisone does not cure the arthritis.

Surgical

Surgery is recommended if other treatments fail, or when patients have too much pain or too little function.

- One type of surgery is **joint fusion**, in which the arthritis surface is removed and the bones on each side of the joint are fused together. This eliminates motion in the problem joint. It is used to relieve pain and correct deformities that interfere with function.
- Another type of surgery is **joint reconstruction**. It involves removing the degenerated joint surface to eliminate the rough, irregular bone-to-bone contact that causes pain and restricts motion. Once the degenerated portion of the joint surface is removed, it may be replaced with donor cartilage or with a joint replacement implant.

The type of surgery that is done depends on the joint(s) involved, your activities, and your needs. Your hand surgeon can help you decide which type of surgery is best for you.

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON
MEDICAL CENTER
UW Medicine

Orthopaedics/UWMC Hand Center

Box 354740

1959 N.E. Pacific St. Seattle, WA 98195

206-598-4263

www.orthop.edu/hand