

Activity Modification and Joint Protection

Sometimes things that we do every day stress our bodies. By changing the way you move, you can make these tasks easier on your body. This is called *activity modification*.

Joint protection refers to ways of using your hands and upper extremities so you do not put too much stress on your joints, tendons, and muscles.

Everyone—not just those with hand or arm problems—can use joint protection and activity modification to help them now and to protect themselves from having problems in the future.

General Rules

- Follow an exercise program to maintain your strength and range of motion. Keeping active helps you prevent muscle, bone, tendon, and joint injury.
- Pay attention to how you use your hands and what activities are painful for you. Avoid pinching with your palm face down or pinching that makes your hand or thumb look deformed. Protect your joints by using tools like jar openers, electric can openers, or spring-loaded scissors.
- Plan frequent rests. Whether you are typing, hammering, gardening, or texting, doing the same activity over and over without a break can bring on aches and pains. Avoid aches and pains by allowing yourself a few minutes to do a more restful activity.
- Organize and prioritize. Make a list of what you need to do and when it needs to be done. If you have a plan, you can avoid using more effort than you need and will be able to spread the physical demands over time.
- Use larger muscles more than smaller ones when reaching or lifting by keeping your elbows as close to your body as possible.
- Respect pain. If you have pain that lasts for hours after certain activities, seek advice from a physician.
- Seek medical advice for consistent pain. Your doctor or hand therapist might suggest protective splints or home exercise programs to help protect your joints.



What can I do today to help myself?

Simplify dressing. If you know you have trouble with pinching, clasping, buttoning, or zipping:

- Wear tops with as few buttons as possible and bottoms with elastic waists. These are available for all fashion styles and will make life easier for troubled hands. A little Velcro also can be used behind buttons.
- Fasten a bra in the front or opt for a sports bra.
- Use a string or zipper pull to help pull zippers that are difficult to reach, and a buttoner to fasten buttons.
- Wear slip-on shoes, or use elastic laces or shoe locks to keep you from having trouble with fastening.

Lighten your load. Carrying a heavy bag or purse can hurt your neck, shoulders, and arms. Things to try:

- Avoid bags or purses that are heavy when they are empty, because they only will be heavier when full! The smaller the bag, the better.
- Messenger-type bags that cross the body and/or fanny packs allow the weight to be spread evenly so that you don't put too much stress on one side of the body or the other.
- Carry weight close to your body and avoid reaching out and grabbing objects like laptops or briefcases. A lot of stress is put on your hand joints and the forearm muscles when they are forced to lift several pounds with your elbows away from the body.

Cook with confidence. Many kitchen activities can be painful, but thankfully, there are ways to make cooking fun again:

- Use an electric can opener to open cans, and a jar opener to open jars. These are available at any store that sells kitchen appliances and accessories.
- Use kitchen tools with wide, cushioned grips.
- Use items that keep your hand relaxed: sponges rather than dishtowels, and oven mitts rather than oven pads.
- When possible, use levers rather than knobs to adjust faucets.

Avoid the pain of the pen. Like kitchen gadgets, slim handled pens can make writing painful. Pens with wide grips or pens shaped in a “Y” can take stress off of your joints.

Paraffin wax treatments—even in a home machine—can ease the soreness of arthritic hands, especially in cold climates.

Need more help? Ask your hand surgeon if you should see a Certified Hand Therapist.