

JOINT PROTECTION MANAGEMENT ADVICE

Joint protection requires small lifestyle changes that once learned become second nature. Making these changes to your normal activities allows you to protect the delicate small joints of the hands and wrists to preserve your joints and reduce pain. This is vital in people suffering from arthritis. It can take time to get used to doing things differently, but keep practising and it will become part of your routine.

AVOID STATIC OR REPETITIVE ACTIVITIES

When you stay in one position for a long time some muscles overwork pulling the joint out of alignment. The muscles also get tired quickly causing the joints to take more strain as the muscles fatigue. This leads to more pain and damage to the joint. Take regular rests when performing repetitive activities.

AVOID PROLONGED PERIODS OF ACTIVITY

The nature of arthritis means that you may always have some pain. Pain lasting more than one hour after finishing an activity means that the activity was too much and should have been changed or stopped sooner. Try to begin to become aware of the warning signs you feel that your joints are becoming fatigued or strained and stop before you reach this point in the future. Try and work out if you can modify the activity to avoid it causing pain in the first place. Take regular breaks to give your hands a rest.

AVOID ACTIVITIES THAT REQUIRE SMALL TIGHT GRIPS OR PROLONGED GRIPPING

Tight small grips place increased strain through the joints which will increase your pain and can further damage your joints. It is better to avoid it. Ways to reduce the need for small grips include:

- Use thick or padded pens for writing.
- Rest books on a table or book rest.
- Use a chopping board with spikes to hold vegetables.
- Use easy grip cutlery and utensils.
- Allow hand washing to drip-dry rather than wringing it out.
- Change your taps to lever taps.
- Use plug and key turner adapters

Ask your therapist if you would like more information on any of these tools.

AVOID ACTIVITIES AND POSITIONS THAT COULD LEAD TO DEFORMITY

Joints work best in certain positions. When they are used in the wrong position, such as twisting, extra force is placed through the joint and the muscles are unable to work as well, eventually causing pain and deformity.

Damage to your joints could lead to deformities in your hand, such as your fingers appearing to drift in the direction of your little finger (ulnar deviation) or your individual fingers bending or straightening in unusual positions (swan neck deformity). Activities can be changed to avoid these.

- When turning taps or opening and closing jars, use the palm of your hand. Remind others not to close them too tightly.
- Use a flat hand when dusting or wiping.

- Try to use lightweight mugs with large handles rather than small teacups so pressure is not put on just one or two fingers.

USE ONE LARGE JOINT OR MANY JOINTS

Larger joints are protected by larger muscles which makes them better suited to absorbing strain and stresses. It is therefore better to use large joints where possible, or try to spread the force over many joints to reduce the strains on individual joints.

Try to -

- Use two hands to hold objects wherever possible.
- Use the palms of your hands and not your fingers and thumbs when you carry plates or dishes.
- When standing up from a chair, try to rock gently forward and use your leg muscles to stand up rather than pushing from your knuckles or wrists.
- Carry light bags from a strap on your shoulder rather than in your hands.
- Use your hip/shoulder to close drawers.
- Use your forearms to take the weight of objects when carrying, not your hands. Hug objects close to your body.

REDUCE THE AMOUNT OF WEIGHT YOU TAKE THROUGH YOUR JOINTS

- Consider wheeled trolleys rather than carrying things.
- Use double handled saucepans,
- Use a wire baskets/steamers to cook vegetables
- When you buy new equipment, make sure it is lightweight.
- Use a teapot and/or kettle tipper and fill the kettle with a lightweight jug
- If you can't reduce the weight – slide objects rather than lift.

PACING YOUR ACTIVITY - BALANCE REST AND ACTIVITY

- It is important to balance your rest and activity to allow your joints time to rest and repair.
- Stop before you feel tired or are in pain.
- Try to avoid activities that you can't stop when you need to.
- Try to plan ahead. Write a weekly or daily diary allowing rest and activity periods. Think about what you need to do and space the harder activities out over time.
- Activities such as vacuuming, ironing and cleaning windows mean that you are doing the same movements lots of times and keeping the hand in the same position for long periods of time. Try to do them for very short periods, or where possible get someone else to do them for you.

ORGANISE AND ARRANGE SPACE

Prepare your work areas so that everything you need for that activity is accessible. Store items you use often in places that are easy to reach.

SIMPLIFY ACTIVITIES

- Use clothes that are easy to care for
- Make the bed on one side and then the other.
- Soak dishes before washing them and let them drip dry.
- Where possible use tinned, frozen or prepared foods.
- Hang items within easy reach.
- Where possible get someone else to help with activities that you find cause pain or poor joint positions.

THE ROLE OF HAND THERAPY IN JOINT PROTECTION

SHOULD I EXERCISE MY HANDS?

It is important to maintain the range of movement in your joints to allow good functional use. Exercise can help to relieve pain, maintain bone and muscle strength and keep your joints moving. Without regular exercise your hands will become stiffer and weaker and activities become more difficult. Maintaining strong muscles around your joints can help keep them in a good position and prevent over fatigue. Do not overdo your exercises or use weights or resistance unless your therapist prescribes. Overexercising may cause more harm to your joints.

DO I NEED TO WEAR A SPLINT?

Your therapist will talk to you about wearing a splint if they feel this may benefit you. These can be used to rest a joint and allow the muscles around it to relax. This can help reduce swelling and pain. Splints can also be used to prevent deformities around the joint or stop existing deformities from worsening. It is often advisable to wear one during activity to support a joint and restrict movement.

There are various types of splint. Your therapist would advise regarding the most suitable splint for you. These include thermoplastic splints, and neoprene splints. A thermoplastic resting splint, due to its strength can be used during activity to restrict movement around the joint. Softer splints made from neoprene allow more movement.

Key Points to Remember

- 1. Use your joints in a good position.*
- 2. Avoid activities that do not allow for a regular change in position.*
- 3. Respect pain – don't push through it...*
- 4. Avoid tight grips or gripping for long periods.*
- 5. Avoid actions/positions that may lead to joint deformity.*
- 6. Use one large joint or many joints whenever possible.*
- 7. Reduce the amount of weight you take through your joints.*
- 8. Pace your activities to ensure a balance of rest and activity.*
- 9. Simplify activities to make them more manageable*
- 10. Complete any exercises given to you regularly.*
- 11. Use any splints provided for you.*