Your Journey with Hand and Wrist Osteoarthritis

For more information scan this QR code or go to myhealth.alberta.ca/hand-and-wrist-oa-pathway

Osteoarthritis is the most common type of arthritis. While osteoarthritis can occur anywhere in the body, this pathway focuses on osteoarthritis in the hands and wrists. Although hand and wrist osteoarthritis impacts people differently, common symptoms include pain, tenderness, and loss of function (for example, you can no longer do all the things you used to do with your hands).
You are the most important part of your healthcare team. This guide will help you to know what to expect as you work with your team to manage and treat osteoarthritis in the hand and wrist. If you have any questions along the way, please ask your healthcare team. Click on the page numbers in blue if you want more information about the step in your journey.

Before your appointment (page 7)

- Write down how you feel, your symptoms, and any questions or concerns.
- Consider how your symptoms change over the day and with certain activities. Is there anything that makes your symptoms better or worse?
- Prepare to share any treatments you have tried and whether they have helped.
- Consider bringing a family member or friend to support you.

Visit your healthcare provider (page 8)

- Your healthcare provider may ask questions about the symptoms you are experiencing and how they impact your day-to-day life.
- To better manage your health condition, your healthcare provider needs to hear from you and understand who you are and what matters to you.
- Share all your symptoms and concerns. Your health includes physical, emotional, spiritual, financial, and social elements.
- Your provider may examine your hands. They may ask about pain and tenderness and look for any signs of swelling or other changes.

Whole-person health
(Page 2)

Get your tests (page 10)

- Your healthcare provider may ask you to go for an x-ray of your hands and wrists.
- You may be asked to go for a blood test if your healthcare provider needs more information.

Review your test results (page 11)

- You may find your test results on MyHealth Alberta Account or MyChart (myhealth.alberta.ca/account) or ask your healthcare provider to print them for you
- It is important to talk with your healthcare provider to help you understand your test results and how they will healp your team and you decide what to do next.

Review your treatment & management options (page 11)

- Non-surgical options are tried first to see if they help with your symptoms, like:
  - Resting, changes to your activities, assistive devices and splinting
  - Medicines (topical or oral)
- Decide with your healthcare provider what will work best for you.

Talk with your healthcare provider about a referral (page 18)

- You may be referred to a surgeon for assessment and to discuss options. Ask who you are being sent to and what they do, how long it may take to be seen, and what to do if you don't hear back.
- Referral to a surgeon is based on your symptoms, impacts on your day-to-day life, and how you respond to non-surgical treatment.
- Surgery can help with pain but doesn't usually improve mobility.

Keep taking care of yourself (page 20)

- Write down any changes you notice in your symptoms and talk with your healthcare provider if you have new symptoms or a new mass.
- Look for other healthy lifestyle resources and supports.

Important Tips:

Need a family doctor?
ahs.ca/findaprovider

Need a translator?
Let your healthcare provider know

Need health advice?
Call Health Link at 811

Need to find programs and services in your community?

Call 211 or visit ab.211.ca

Primary Care Alberta

Current as of: June 2026

How to use this resource

Healthcare professionals in Alberta wrote this pathway using the best available evidence. It is meant as general health information to help you know what to expect as you work with your healthcare team. But everyone has their own unique journey with hand and wrist osteoarthritis. This pathway does not replace the advice of a qualified healthcare provider. Always talk with your healthcare team and follow their recommendations for your specific care.

Whole-person health

The whole-person health approach will help you and your healthcare team better manage your health condition. It is drawn from the teachings of the medicine wheel.

Whole-person health means thinking about all parts of your health and wellness: physical, financial and social, spiritual, and emotional. All of these parts are connected and influence each other. It's important to be aware of your personal needs in each part and to share that information with your healthcare team.

- **Physical**: your specific health conditions and how well your body works
- **Financial and Social**: your ability to meet your housing, transportation, food, and health needs, feeling supported to manage your daily life, and having meaningful relationships
- **Spiritual**: your beliefs, sense of connection, and purpose
- **Emotional**: how you think, feel, and cope with life events

Whole-person health

Whole-person health also reminds us that we are all connected and work together: you, your support systems, and your healthcare providers. Your healthcare providers could be your doctor, nurse practitioner, or a team that comes together with you to plan and organize your care.

Your healthcare provider needs to understand who you are and what matters to you. This helps to build trust. But it can be hard to know what to share or what to say. Try starting by asking yourself:

"What are the things in my life that are important to me?"

"What are the things in my life that may be affecting my health and well-being?"

Bringing forward what matters to you is important. Here are some examples of things you may want to talk about with your healthcare provider:

Physical

"The pain in my hands makes it hard for me to do my job. I worry about how long I will be able to keep working."

"By the end of the day, I find it very difficult to do the things I enjoy."

"Opening jars is hard."

"Because of my pain and how hard it is for me to use my hand, it's difficult to take care of myself."

Financial

"I'm not sure how I will pay for the splints or assistive devices I need."

Social

"I need my daughter with me as a translator."

"I don't see my friends as much as I used to because I have so much pain."

Emotional

"I'm feeling very frustrated as it's harder to do things now."

"I don't like how my hands look."

"I'm worried I won't be able to get to all of my appointments."

"I'm struggling with the grief and loss for the things I have had to give up."

Spiritual

"It's important that I follow traditional healing practices."

"I'm a believer of natural healing. Are there any natural treatments I can try?"

"The pain is interrupting my life so much that I'm unhappy."

What is hand and wrist osteoarthritis?

Arthritis and osteoarthritis

Arthritis is a condition that affects the joints (the areas where 2 bones meet). Arthritis can often cause pain, swelling, and stiffness in your joints. Arthritis is considered a **chronic disease** because it doesn't go away and a **progressive disease** because it can get worse over time. Your healthcare team will ask questions about your symptoms and do some tests to help determine what type of arthritis you have. A person can have more than one type of arthritis.

Osteoarthritis (OA) is the most common type of arthritis. Osteoarthritis happens when the cartilage that protects your joints breaks down faster than your body can replace it. Cartilage is the tough elastic material that covers and protects the ends of your bones to allow smooth movement. When the cartilage breaks down, the bones rub together and start to damage the joint. This damage can cause pain, swelling, and stiffness and can impact how you use your joints, including your hands and wrists.

Did you know?

4.4 million people in Canada have osteoarthritis.

This number is expected to grow to **10 million** by 2040.

That's **1 in 4** Canadians living with osteoarthritis.

Image from Bone and Joint Strategic Clinical Network

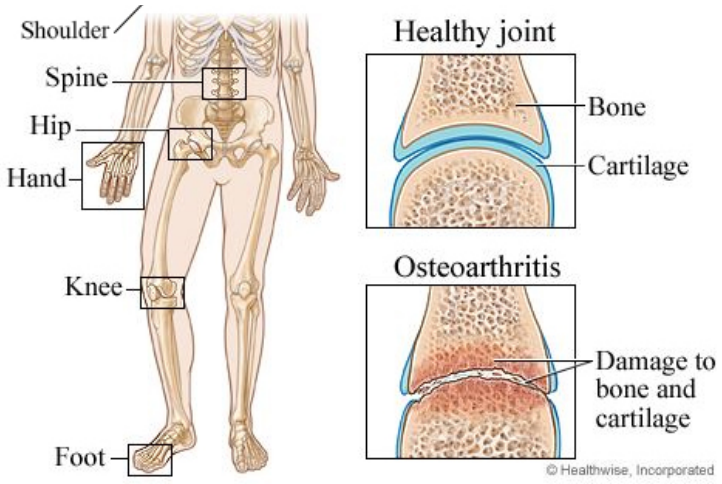


Image from MyHealth Alberta: About osteoarthritis

Hand and wrist osteoarthritis

While osteoarthritis can occur in many joints in the body (for example, knees, spine, shoulder, feet), this pathway will focus on osteoarthritis of the hands and wrists, which are among the most common joints affected.

If you think you may have osteoarthritis in your hands and wrists, it is important to discuss what you are experiencing with your healthcare team. They can offer support to help you manage your symptoms and make the things you need and want to do easier.

Hand and wrist osteoarthritis affects everyone differently. Some people experience a lot of symptoms and joint changes while others do not. Some days, you may not experience any symptoms and other days, you may find that your symptoms make it hard for you to do things you could do very easily before, like doing up buttons and zippers, opening cans, turning the key in the car ignition, using clippers and scissors, holding a pen, and brushing your teeth.

Common joints in the hands and wrists that are affected by osteoarthritis are:

Fingers

Osteoarthritis is most common in:

- Index and middle fingers.
- Distal interphalangeal (DIP) joints in the fingers, which are the joints closest to the fingernails.
- Proximal interphalangeal (PIP) joints in the fingers, which are the joints in the middle of the fingers.

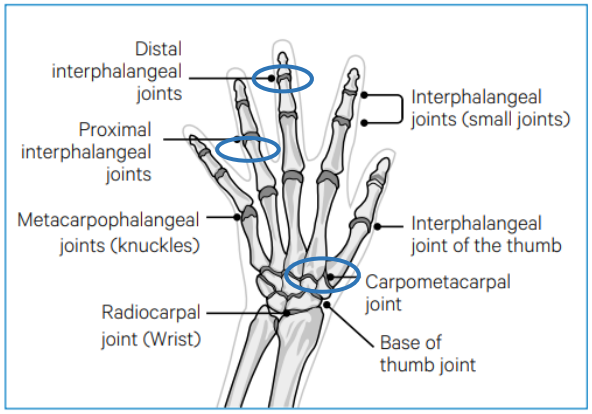


Image modified from: Arthritis UK

Thumb:

- Osteoarthritis is most common in the carpometacarpal (CMC) joint at the base of the thumb (where your thumb meets your wrist).
- Pain and stiffness are most noticeable when pinching or gripping objects or when doing twisting motions like opening a jar.

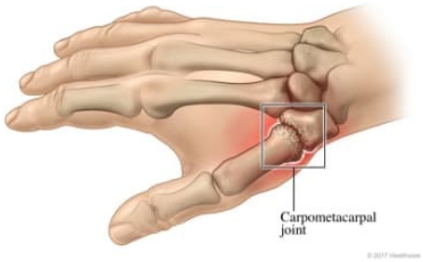


Image from MyHealth Alberta: Learning About Arthritis at the Base of the Thumb

Wrists:

- Scaphoid Lunate Advanced Collapse (SLAC) is the most common type of wrist arthritis and occurs between two small bones in the wrist.
- SLAC wrist can cause pain that is often felt at the back of the wrist, stiffness, and weakness of the wrist.

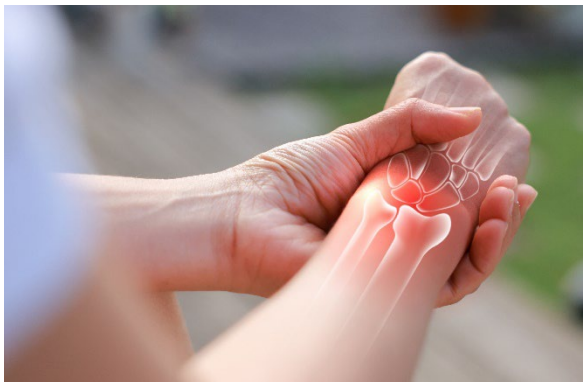


Image from iStock

Symptoms of hand and wrist osteoarthritis

- **Joint stiffness**: Especially when you first wake from sleep (usually lasts less than an hour). Stiffness often returns at the end of the day or after activity.
- **Chronic pain** (pain that lasts longer than 3 months): Pain often occurs during or after activity or exercise and usually improves with rest. Pain is usually described as dull or burning but there can also be other types of pain (for example, sharp pain) during certain activities.
- **Loss of function**: It can be hard to bend the joints and make a full fist due to pain and stiffness.
- **Decreased strength:** You may notice weakness or instability of your hand and wrists.
- **Crepitus**: You may hear cracking, creaking, or crunching when you move your hand and wrists. This is called crepitus. This happens when your bones rub against each other without the cartilage there for protection.
- **Change in how your hands look**: You may have firm, bony bumps at the finger joints (known as Heberden's nodes or Bouchard's nodes, depending on the joint affected) and at the base of the thumb. Your fingers may become crooked and stiff.

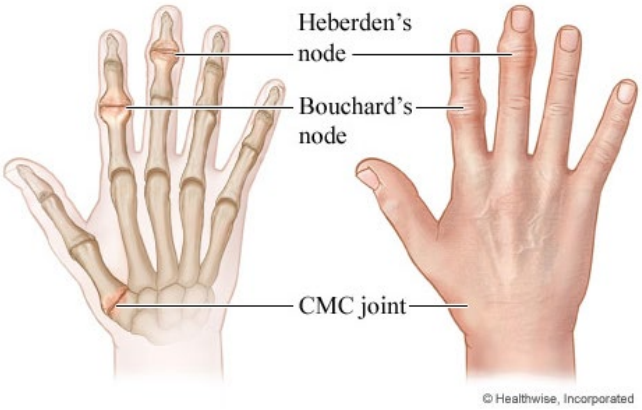


Image from MyHealth Alberta: Heberden's and Bouchard's nodes

- **Cysts**: If osteoarthritis occurs at the joint closest to the fingernail (DIP joints), a small cyst called a mucous cyst may develop. This cyst can cause ridges or dents in your fingernail. These cysts can also break open and leak a gelatinous (jelly-like) fluid. If the cyst is opening or you notice signs of infection, contact your healthcare provider.
- **Fatigue**: It can take more energy to do things when you have pain and stiffness.

Image: Mucous Cyst

Swelling is less common with hand and wrist osteoarthritis.

Risk factors for hand and wrist osteoarthritis

Things that can increase your chance of getting hand and wrist osteoarthritis include:

- A previous injury (for example, a fracture, break, or dislocation) may cause osteoarthritis in the affected joint or in nearby joints. In particular, wrist osteoarthritis may occur after a wrist injury.
- Doing certain everyday movements that put stress on your joints.
- Having a parent or sibling who has hand and wrist osteoarthritis.

Hand and wrist osteoarthritis also becomes more common as you get older and is also more common in females.

Before your appointment

Here are a few tips to help you get ready for your appointment with your healthcare provider:

- Consider using a symptom tracker or a notebook to write down important information to share with your healthcare team about your symptoms. Using a symptom tracker or taking notes can help you remember what symptoms you're feeling, when it started, how often it happens, and what makes it better or worse.
    - Have your symptoms changed over time?
    - Track what makes your symptoms better or worse throughout the day. For example, are your symptoms worse at a certain time of day or with certain activities (for example, when using tools or equipment)?
    - Is there anything you've done to relieve your symptoms and has it helped?

- Write down a list of your questions and concerns, including how your symptoms are affecting your ability to do tasks and activities. When you're done, read your list and mark the most important things.
- Make a list of the prescription and non-prescription (over the counter) medicines you use, including any vitamins, herbs, and supplements.
- Ask someone you trust to go with you to your appointment. They can help you ask questions, write down instructions, and remember explanations.

Helpful tools and resources

- **Use a symptom tracker:** hqa.ca/symptom-tracker (Health Quality Alberta)
- To get the most out of your visit, plan to write notes during the visit or see the Alberta Health Services **My Care Conversations app** (ahs.ca/careapp) website for more information about recording your conversation with your healthcare provider.

Visit your healthcare provider

It can sometimes feel uncomfortable to discuss things that you find difficult to do or can no longer do. This may include tasks like doing up buttons or holding a fork. Your healthcare provider knows it can be hard to talk about these things, and they are there to support you. Seeking support early can help you manage your symptoms and make the things you need and want to do easier.

Healthcare provider's assessment

Many conditions can cause hand and wrist pain. To help determine what is causing your symptoms, your healthcare provider may ask you questions about the symptoms you are experiencing and how they impact your day-to-day life. They may ask:

- What impact are your symptoms having on the things that are important to you, like your job, hobbies and interests, and relationships?
- Is there anything that you have stopped doing (or stopped doing as often) because you want to avoid symptoms?
- Are your symptoms affecting you emotionally (for example, are you feeling grief or frustration)?
- Where are you experiencing symptoms (for example, where on your fingers, thumbs or wrists do you have symptoms)?
- What makes your symptoms better or worse?
- What has worked for you in the past to manage your hand and wrist symptoms?

- Whether you have ever had an injury to your hands or wrists.
- Whether you have a job or do activities that require you to use your hands a lot (repetitive use).
- Whether anyone else in your family has hand and wrist osteoarthritis.

Your healthcare provider will also look at your hands to check for any changes (for example, swelling, Heberden's nodes, or Bouchard's nodes), pain, range of motion and stiffness.

When you see your healthcare provider, ask them:

- Are there things I can do to help prevent further joint damage?
- Are there education or support programs for pain available in the community or online?

What should I watch for (symptoms of concern)?

Contact your healthcare provider if you have:

- Pain that wakes you at night (may occur with more advanced disease)
- Changes in pain patterns, like pain that is getting worse
- Sudden, unexplained swelling, warmth or pain in any joint
- Joint pain with fever or rash
- Joints that are too painful to use
- Feeling generally unwell or having a fever
- A mass that develops

What else should I share with my healthcare provider?

- Changes in your mood and social activity
- What types of things help you work better with your healthcare provider and what you expect and need from the relationship with your healthcare provider

There are lots of things in your life that can impact your ability to manage your health, like:

- Problems with money, housing, and access to transportation
- Alcohol or drug use
- Not enough support or help
- Childhood experiences

It's important to talk about these things with your healthcare provider because they all play a role in your health and well-being.

You are the most important part of your healthcare team.

If you don't understand what your healthcare provider is telling you, let them know right away. Be open and honest. You might say:

"This is new to me. Could you please explain it slowly, using language that is easier to understand?"

"It sounded like you said that I should… Did I understand that correctly?"

"Can you show me a picture or model to help me understand?"

Helpful tools and resources

Making the most of your appointment:

myhealth.alberta.ca/health/pages/conditions.aspx?Hwid=hw226888

Working with your healthcare team: hqa.ca/info (Health Quality Alberta)

Get your tests

Your healthcare provider may send you to get an x-ray of your hands and wrists. The x-ray may show changes in the structure of your hands and wrists. But the amount of change shown in x-rays does not always relate to the symptoms you are experiencing.

It is important to note that after an initial x-ray shows osteoarthritis, repeating the x-ray is not helpful unless something changes significantly with your condition, like if you have a sudden change in your symptoms.

Your healthcare provider may order blood tests if they need more information to determine the type of arthritis you have or whether another hand and wrist condition is causing your symptoms.

Other types of tests like ultrasounds and MRIs are not helpful for diagnosing osteoarthritis.

Review your test results

It is important to know what your test results are and what they mean for you personally. Take time to discuss your results with your healthcare provider. Medical terms can be hard to understand. And even common words like "positive" or "negative" might mean something different for medical tests. Ask your healthcare provider for explanations and examples to make sure you fully understand.

You might ask:

"What does this mean for me?"

"Is there a current concern? If so, what is it?"

Helpful tools and resources

You may find some of your results and health information using secure online tools:

MyHealth Alberta Account
See your lab results, immunizations, and some other results with a MyHealth Alberta Account. Sign up at myhealth.alberta.ca/account.

MyChart
See your health information, manage your Alberta Health Services appointments, and interact directly with some members of your healthcare team. Ask your healthcare provider how to access your MyChart account. Learn more at ahs.ca/mychart.

Review your treatment and management options

Although there is no cure for osteoarthritis, there are many things you can try that can help you to manage your symptoms. There are resources available to help you learn about and manage your condition. Work with your healthcare team to deevelop a care plan that will work best for you.

A symptom management plan can be a useful tool to track your symptoms and whether the strategies you are trying as part of your care plan are helping. See the end of this pathway for a sample symptom management diary. Review your care plan with your healthcare provider at every visit and make changes as needed.

Understanding your pain

- Learning about pain neuroscience can help you understand your pain and feel more in control of your pain. For more information, visit: Pain Science Education - Alberta Healthy Living Program Calgary Zone.
- Learn about pacing to help you get stronger without making your pain worse. For more information, visit: Pacing for People with Chronic Pain - Alberta Healthy Living Program.

Medical treatment options

Protect your joints with safe hand and wrist movements

Spread the load and use stronger joints

- Use two hands instead of one when handling heavier items (for example, when pouring milk from a jug, use one hand to hold the handle of the jug and put your other hand underneath the milk jug).
- Avoid using the painful joint: Use larger joints and muscles to do things (for example, carry grocery bags on your arm towards the elbows instead of in your hands and use an over the shoulder or cross body bag rather than a handbag).

Spread the load

Image: Generative AI (Copilot Chat) was used to create and edit this image.

Image: Microsoft Word.

Image: Microsoft Word.

Avoid gripping tightly or for long periods

- Choose items, like cutlery, with bigger handles or use padding or grips to make handles bigger. You can also use padding or grips to make things easier to hold, like a pen grip that helps you hold a pen more gently.

Example of a pen grip

Image: Hand Osteoarthritis and Adaptive Devices | Dorset County Hospital

Foam grip tubing

Image: Amazon.ca

- Gently stretch your hands regularly during gripping tasks like knitting and writing.
- Take frequent breaks from repetitive activities like typing, gardening, hammering, knitting, or rowing and stretch your hands and wrists.

Use less effort

- Use assistive devices, like jar and bottle openers, doorknob extenders that convert doorknobs to levers to help you open doors more easily, and Velcro fasteners on clothing and shoes to replace buttons and laces.

Helpful devices/Assistive equipment

Images: Hand Osteoarthritis and Adaptive Devices | Dorset County Hospital

- Use lighter items, like lighter dishes.
- Look for tools that don't use your hands, like a stand-up mixer instead of a hand mixer.
- Use electric tools, like using an electric can opener instead of a manual can opener

- Use a backpack or shopping cart to help you do your shopping and avoid carrying heavy bags.
- If your joints hurt when you do an activity, try a different way to do things (for example, when quilting, use a sewing machine instead of hand quilting).

Image: iStock

Avoid positions that hurt

- Keep your hands and wrists in a neutral position by using items such as an ergonomic computer mouse and assistive kitchen and gardening equipment.

Assistive devices

Images: Amazon and Hand Osteoarthritis and Adaptive Devices | Dorset County Hospital

Use joints in a stable position

- When carrying and gripping objects, keep your wrist straight and your fingers in line with your wrists.
- Avoid activities that require the wrists being bent for longer periods.

Supportive therapies

Heat and cold

Heat (for example, a hot pack or a warm bath) and cold (for example, an ice pack) can help make your joints feel better.

- Make sure to protect your skin when using heat and cold therapy. For more information about heat and cold therapies, see MyHealth Alberta (https://myhealth.alberta.ca/Health/pages/conditions.aspx?hwid=acn6587&lang=en).

Splints

Splinting can be effective in preventing painful joints from moving. The splint should stabilize the joint where you have osteoarthritis. Ask your healthcare provider what type of splint you need. You may be given a prescription for a specific splint. It is important that you understand what your splint is meant to do and how to wear it.

Restricting joint movement with a splint may impact how you do activities, as it restricts the position of your hand and wrist. If a joint is to be stabilized, then it should be in a position that allows you to do what you need to do.

Different types of splints include:

- **For osteoarthritis in the fingers or thumb**: Ring splints can be used but should be fitted to be effective. Splints should not cover the tips of your fingers as that makes it harder for the finger to feel things and to be used properly.
- **For 1st CMC osteoarthritis (base of the thumb):** The splint, such as a short thumb spica, should position your thumb so that you can pinch.
- **For wrist osteoarthritis:** The splint should position your wrist in the neutral position, allow movement of your fingers, and support your wrist joint.

Example of a 1st CMC osteoarthritis splint. Image from: Amazon

Example of a wrist splint. Image from: DynaMed

You can buy splints at a pharmacy, medical supply store, online or have them custom made. Always check to see if you have private insurance that will help cover the cost of splints.

Other things to think about when choosing a splint:

- Skin health and splint fit: Check for marks on your skin.
- Hygiene: The splint should be easy to wash.
- Splints are task-specific (they should only be worn for certain tasks) and should not be worn all the time. Splints should be removed several times a day so you can move your joints and care for your skin.

Activity and exercise

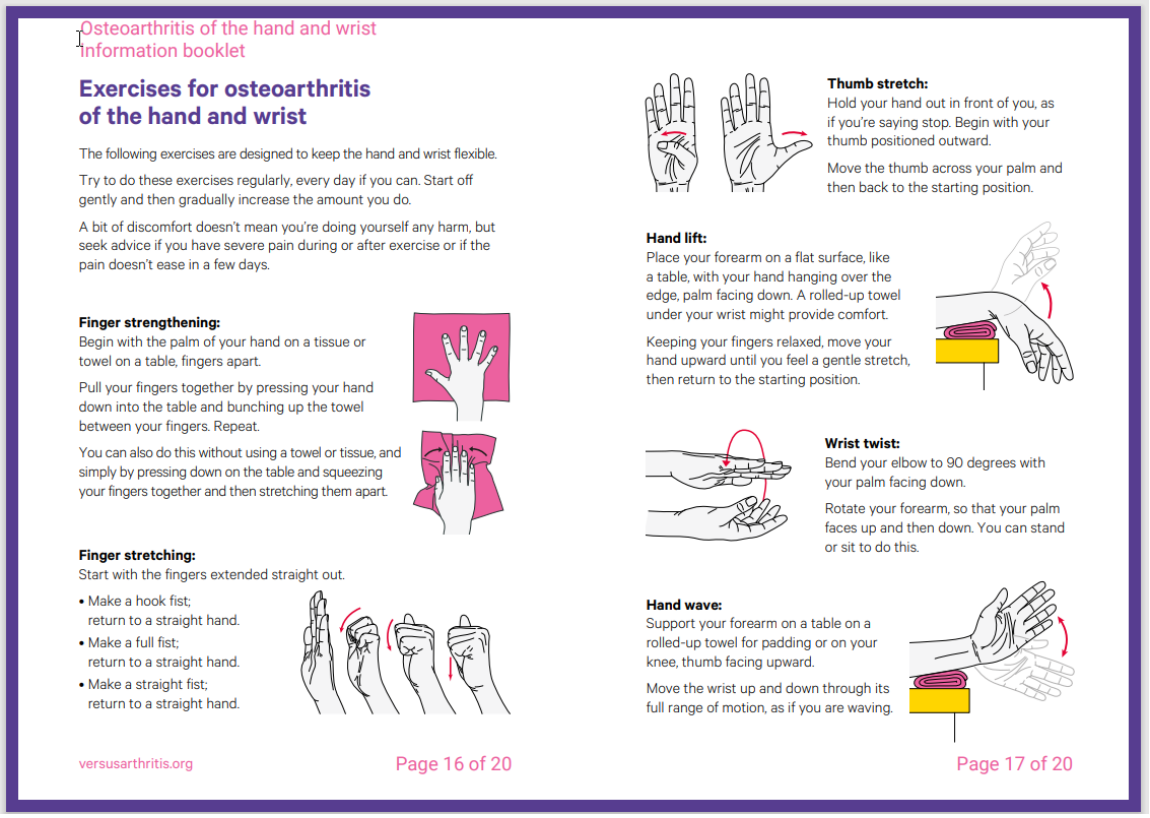
It can be hard to think about exercising a joint when you are in pain. Understanding why exercise is important for joint health can help you manage any fear or anxiety you might have about moving the joint.

- Moving your joint is important to keep it working well.

- Activity and exercise can be used with other symptom management strategies. For example, you can take pain medicine before exercising, or use heat or cold therapy after exercising.
- Plan for rest between activities and exercises.

Talk with your healthcare team before you start an exercise program or activity or if you encounter challenges along the way.

- If you need additional support, you can call the Rehabilitation Advice Line at 811.



Osteoarthritis of the hand and wrist
Information booklet

Exercises for osteoarthritis of the hand and wrist

The following exercises are designed to keep the hand and wrist flexible.

Try to do these exercises regularly, every day if you can. Start off gently and then gradually increase the amount you do.

A bit of discomfort doesn't mean you're doing yourself any harm, but seek advice if you have severe pain during or after exercise or if the pain doesn't ease in a few days.

Finger strengthening:
Begin with the palm of your hand on a tissue or towel on a table, fingers apart.

Pull your fingers together by pressing your hand down into the table and bunching up the towel between your fingers. Repeat.

You can also do this without using a towel or tissue, and simply by pressing down on the table and squeezing your fingers together and then stretching them apart.

Finger stretching:
Start with the fingers extended straight out.

- Make a hook fist; return to a straight hand.
- Make a full fist; return to a straight hand.
- Make a straight fist; return to a straight hand.

versusarthritis.org

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Thumb stretch:
Hold your hand out in front of you, as if you're saying stop. Begin with your thumb positioned outward.

Move the thumb across your palm and then back to the starting position.

Hand lift:
Place your forearm on a flat surface, like a table, with your hand hanging over the edge, palm facing down. A rolled-up towel under your wrist might provide comfort.

Keeping your fingers relaxed, move your hand upward until you feel a gentle stretch, then return to the starting position.

Wrist twist:
Bend your elbow to 90 degrees with your palm facing down.

Rotate your forearm, so that your palm faces up and then down. You can stand or sit to do this.

Hand wave:
Support your forearm on a table on a rolled-up towel for padding or on your knee, thumb facing upward.

Move the wrist up and down through its full range of motion, as if you are waving.

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Image from: https://www.arthritis-uk.org/information-and-support/living-with-arthritis/health-and-wellbeing/exercising-with-arthritis/exercises-for-healthy-joints/exercises-for-the-fingers-hands-and-wrists/

Hand therapy

Hand therapy is not necessary for all people with hand and wrist osteoarthritis. Talk with your healthcare provider to see if a hand therapist may be able to help you further modify your activities or find the right splint.

There may be costs associated with seeing a hand therapist. Always check to see if you have private insurance that may help cover the cost of this therapy.

Acupuncture

Acupuncture may provide some relief for some people, but the evidence is mixed.

Medications

Pain medicines won't make all the symptoms of your osteoarthritis go away. The goal when using pain medicine is to lower your pain level so that you can be more comfortable, move better and do the things you enjoy and need to do.

Using pain medicine can be supported by other strategies (for example, rest, splinting and assistive devices).

Always take medicine as directed. Talk with your pharmacist, primary care provider, or other healthcare provider if you have any questions.

Your healthcare provider might recommend:

- **Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory (NSAIDs) topical creams or gels:** These are medicines that you put on your skin. They are often the first medicines recommended since there are fewer side effects. Examples include diclofenac gel.
- **Oral (pill-form) non-steroidal anti-inflammatories (NSAIDs)**: These medicines should only be used for a short period of time and should be avoided if you have certain medical conditions. Talk with your healthcare provider if you have other medical conditions before taking this type of medicine. Examples include ibuprofen and naproxen.

Therapies with limited or no evidence to support their use

- **Acetaminophen** is only recommended for hand and wrist pain if you are not able to take other types of medicines. Talk with your healthcare provider if you have other medical conditions before taking this type of medicine. Examples include Tylenol.
- **Capsaicin cream** is made from pepper plants and can be applied to the skin to help with pain. Apply a small amount to your hand first to see if you can tolerate the burning sensation and to ensure that you do not have an allergic reaction. For more information, visit: Capsaicin for Osteoarthritis.
- **Oral or topical corticosteroids:** These medicines are not recommended for hand and wrist osteoarthritis as they often do not help manage symptoms and may cause side effects.
- **Chondroitin and glucosamine** (natural health products): These won't rebuild your cartilage or make your joints healthier, but some people do find it helps with their symptoms.
- **Steroid injections into joints**: Recent evidence shows that steroid injections do not help relieve symptoms of osteoarthritis and may cause harm [1] [2].
- **Other injections into the joints** (for example, hyaluronic acid, prolotherapy, Platelet Rich Plasma-PRP): There is a lack of evidence to support that other types of injections

are beneficial for the management of osteoarthritis symptoms. There is also often a cost associated with these injections.

- **Opioids** are not recommended as there is very little evidence that they help with osteoarthritis pain and there is the risk of unpleasant side effects and risk of harm.
- **Medical cannabis** is not recommended as there is no evidence to show that cannabis is effective for managing hand and wrist osteoarthritis pain.

Surgery

Surgery may be considered when medicines and other therapies have not been enough to manage your pain or if the osteoarthritis is severely impacting your daily activities.

After surgery, you will need a period of recovery. During this period, you may need to modify your activities, wear a splint, and take pain medicine to minimize discomfort. The length of your recovery depends on the surgery performed and on your specific situation.

Surgery for hand and wrist osteoarthritis is done to help with pain. It doesn't usually improve mobility of the joints.

Asking the following questions can help you make an informed decision about your different treatment options and decide which ones may work best for you:

"What are the advantages and disadvantages of each option?"

"Can I use any of these options together?"

"How will this make me feel? Will it have side effects?"

"What results can I expect?"

Talk with your healthcare provider about a referral

Not all patients with hand and wrist osteoarthritis need a referral to see a specialist. You and your healthcare provider may decide that a referral to a hand and wrist surgeon (orthopedic and plastic surgeons with special training in hand and wrist conditions) is needed if your symptoms are severe or treatment has not been effective.

- You can find out more about the referral criteria for a specialist by asking your healthcare provider.
- Ask your healthcare provider any questions you may have about surgery (for example, what to expect and what recovery might look like). You can use this information to support your decision about whether you are interested in exploring surgery or not.

While you are waiting to see a specialist, it is important that you continue your treatment such as rest and splinting.

When you see the specialist:

- The hand and wrist surgeon will meet with you to discuss your health concerns.
- They will examine your hands.
- They may ask for additional tests.
- The surgeon will discuss treatment options with you (including benefits and risks).

Helpful tools and resources

To learn about how to prepare for your specialist appointment, check out the QuRE Patient and Caregiver Journal by visiting ahs.ca/qure.

Start your treatment and management and watch your symptoms

As you try the treatment options you chose, remember that if something doesn't work the way you thought it would, think about other options and connect with your healthcare provider to find a treatment that may work better for you.

Remember to contact your healthcare team if you have:

- Pain that wakes you at night (may occur with more advanced disease)
- Changes in pain patterns, like pain that is getting worse
- Sudden, unexplained swelling, warmth or pain in any joint
- Joint pain with fever or rash
- Joints that are too painful to use
- Feeling generally unwell or having a fever
- A mass that develops

You might feel like you don't want to bother your healthcare team, but no detail is too small to share. If it matters to you, it will matter to your healthcare team.

You can clarify with your healthcare team what to expect in terms of follow-up communication. Connect with your healthcare team whenever you:

- Have questions
- Notice your symptoms getting worse
- Have problems with your medicine
- Haven't gotten test results or heard back about an appointment in the time you had agreed to

Helpful tools and resources

If you can't reach your healthcare provider and need health advice or information, call Health Link anytime, day or night, by dialing **811**.

Keep taking care of yourself

There are many different things that can impact your health and wellness. It is important to be able to work with your healthcare team to decide what is best for you, in your life, given your own unique circumstances as you manage your hand and wrist osteoarthritis symptoms.

Remember, you don't need to do everything all at once. Take realistic and manageable steps in your health and wellness. Consider why making a change may benefit you and the things that matter to you.

Helpful tools and resources

Find programs and resources in your community:

211 connects Albertans to the programs and resources they need, anytime, day or night. Whether you're looking for help with mental health, financial assistance, basic needs or other challenges, 211 is here to help you find supports. It's free, confidential, and available in over 170 languages by phone, making it easy to access help when you need it. To connect with **211 Alberta**:

- Call 211
- Text INFO to 211
- Chat or search at ab.211.ca

The **Alberta Healthy Living Program** offers free workshops, classes, and supervised exercise and nutrition services to adults living with a variety of chronic conditions and diseases. Many education classes and workshops are available province wide. Learn more by visiting ahs.ca/ahlp.

Chronic Disease Management support: ahs.ca/cdm

Health Information & Tools: myhealth.alberta.ca/Pages/HealthInfoToolsDefault.aspx

Resources

There's lots of information out there, and it can be confusing to know what information is accurate and true. Here are some great resources that may be helpful for you.

Osteoarthritis general resources:

- About Arthritis - Arthritis Society Canada
- Osteoarthritis - Arthritis Society Canada

Hand and wrist osteoarthritis resources:

- A Guide for People with Hand Osteoarthritis
- Osteoarthritis: Symptoms, causes, types and treatment | Arthritis UK

Chronic pain resources and pain neuroscience courses and videos:

- Calgary Pain Program: Alberta Health Services
- Explain Pain: Alberta Healthy Living Program (online classes)
- Pain Science Education: Alberta Healthy Living Program (online classes)
- What is Pain Neuroscience: Alberta Health Services (video)
- Practical Pain Neuroscience: Alberta Health Services (video)
- Power Over Pain Portal
- Pain Canada Resources
- Chronic Pain: MyHealth Alberta
- Adult Pain - Treatment, Management and Support (Chronic Pain): MyHealth Alberta

Pain self-management programs and courses:

- Alberta Virtual Pain Program
- Arthritis: Self-Management of Osteoarthritis: Alberta Healthy Living Program (online classes)
- Better Choices, Better Health: Alberta Healthy Living Program

Pacing:

- Pacing for People with Chronic Pain: Alberta Healthy Living Program (online classes)
- Pacing Yourself (includes a pacing activities worksheet)

Hand exercises:

- Arthritis Advice: Hand Exercises - Arthritis Society Canada

Assistive devices:

- Assistive Devices Resource - Arthritis Society Canada

Get help now:

- **Emergency: Call 911**
- Health Link: Call 811

Mental health, addiction, and crisis support:

- 811 or Addiction Helpline: 1-866-332-2322
- 811 or Mental Health Helpline: 1-877-303-2642
- Crisis Text Line: Text CONNECT to 741741
- Suicide Crisis Helpline: Call 988, or visit 988.ca

Helpful tip

If you can't print this resource at home, ask a family member, friend, or your healthcare provider to print it for you. You can also use a computer and printer at your local library.

Community and social supports:

- 211 Alberta: Call 211, or visit ab.211.ca
- Family Violence Info Line: 310-1818, or visit alberta.ca/family-violence-find-supports
- Income Support: 1-866-644-5135, or visit alberta.ca/income-support

Alberta Health Services programs:

- Home Care: ahs.ca/homecare
- Find a Dietitian: ahs.ca/nutrition
    - Health Link has dietitians to answer nutrition questions. Call Health Link at 811 and ask to talk to a dietitian or complete the self-referral form on ahs.ca/811.
- Spiritual Care Services: ahs.ca/spiritualcare
- Support to quit smoking: albertaquits.ca

Primary care (family doctors and nurse practitioners):

- Find a doctor or nurse practitioner: Alberta Find a Provider
- Virtual care guide: ahs.ca/virtualhealth

Patient concerns and feedback:

- Office of Alberta Health/Mental Health Patient Advocates: alberta.ca/office-of-alberta-health-advocates
    - Offers coaching to help you advocate for yourself in the health system, and support to learn how the health system works and how to navigate through it.
- Alberta Health Services Patient Relations: 1-855-550-2555, or visit ahs.ca/patientfeedback

Important phone numbers

Name or clinic name:

Phone number:

Name or clinic name:

Phone number:

Name or clinic name:

Phone number:

Notes

Use this space to take notes.

Background

About this Pathway

The Provincial Pathways Unit co-developed this patient pathway in partnership with:

- Patient and Family Advisors
- Plastic surgery hand and wrist surgeons
- Primary care providers including physicians and nurse practitioners
- Orthopedic hand and wrist surgeons

It is current as of May 2026.

Authors & Conflict of Interest Declaration

This pathway was reviewed and revised by a multi-disciplinary co-design team including specialists and primary care providers from across Alberta. Membership available on request by emailing albertapathways@primarycarealberta.ca.

Pathway Review Process

Patient pathways undergo scheduled review every three years, or earlier if there is a clinically significant change in knowledge or practice. The next scheduled review is May 2029. However, we welcome feedback at any time. Please send us your feedback here.

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Disclaimer

This pathway represents evidence-based best practice but does not override the individual responsibility of healthcare professionals to make decisions appropriate to their patients using their own clinical judgment given their patients' specific clinical conditions, in consultation with patients/alternate decision makers. The pathway is not a substitute for clinical judgment or advice of a qualified healthcare professional. It is expected that all users will seek advice of other appropriately qualified and regulated healthcare providers with any issues transcending their specific knowledge, scope of regulated practice, or professional competence.

Appendix

Symptom Management Diary

Date	Time	*Symptom Description and/or Scale Rating	Medicine and Dosage and/or Non-Medicine Interventions	*Symptom Description and/or Scale Rating 1 hour after intervention	Comments (e.g. side effects from medicines)

Table adapted from: OR_Pain_Management_Diary.pdf

*Pain and symptom scales are very subjective. It can be helpful to attach meaning to each number. Here is one example created by Andrea Mankowski: Mankoski Pain Scale | PainScale.

References

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[2] Y. Li, A. Badre, S. Nathanail, A. Silveira, R. Roberts, M. Furey, R. Chan and M. Lapner, "The Use of Intra-Articular Corticosteroid Injection for Thumb Carpometacarpal Joint Osteoarthritis: A Randomized Controlled Trial," in *COA/CORS/CORA Annual Meeting Chair's Choice Paper Session*, St. John's Newfoundland and Labrador, 2026.