

Osteoarthritis of the Hand

“Working with a knowledgeable hand therapist can make the difference between success and failure in complex hand surgical cases. The therapist extends the continuum of our care, as well as functioning as coach and trainer for our patients.”

Marybeth Ezaki, MD, President, American Society for Surgery of the Hand

What is osteoarthritis in the hand?

There are many joints in the human hand. Joints in the hand are formed where two or more bones meet. In between the joints, we have a cushion called cartilage. Arthritis occurs when the cartilage



between bones becomes thin or worn out. This allows the bones to touch and not move smoothly against one another. Arthritis in the hand may lead to pain, stiffness and loss of function.



Bumps on the fingers that may develop due to osteoarthritis

What is the treatment for osteoarthritis in the hand?

Osteoarthritis in the hand will be diagnosed by a doctor. Often an X-ray is taken to determine if there are changes to the joint surfaces. The doctor may prescribe anti-inflammatory medicine to help ease the discomfort. A referral to a hand therapist will also help to manage osteoarthritis in the hands. If pain and stiffness continue to be a problem, the doctor may recommend surgery.

What causes osteoarthritis in the hand?

Osteoarthritis is caused by overuse, an injury to a joint or “wear and tear” on a joint. This may be present in all joints of the hand or only a few. Other factors that may contribute to osteoarthritis in the hand are age, gender and family history.

What are the symptoms of osteoarthritis in the hand?

Stiffness, pain and weakness are some of the symptoms of osteoarthritis in the hand. Joints in the hand may also have a deep ache, be tender or warm to the touch, develop swelling or have a change in appearance, such as a bump. Osteoarthritis in the hand may make it difficult to perform activities, such as gripping or pinching.

What can a hand therapist do for me?

A hand therapist is a great resource in the treatment of hand osteoarthritis. The main goal in hand therapy is to decrease pain and improve hand function. A hand therapist may suggest using heat to decrease joint stiffness and pain. An orthosis may be used to provide rest and proper positioning to painful joints. A hand therapist will provide instruction in the use of



Example of a resting orthosis for osteoarthritis in the index finger

adaptive equipment and also provide a specialized home program to protect the joints, decrease joint stiffness and improve the ability to use the hand.