

According to the Arthritis Foundation, 50 million Americans live with arthritis or chronic joint symptoms. Arthritis symptoms limit everyday activities and many Americans with arthritis aren't aware of options to help alleviate symptoms. The most common forms of arthritis are osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis. Osteoarthritis is a degenerative joint condition in which joint cartilage deteriorates resulting in pain and loss of movement when bone begins rubbing against bone.

Rheumatoid arthritis is an autoimmune disease in which the joint's lining becomes inflamed as part of the body's immune system response. Rheumatoid arthritis is one of the most serious and disabling types, and affects mostly women. Arthritis can affect all joints including the small joints of the hand. Everyday activities, such as preparing a meal, working at hobbies, carrying grocery bags, or using your computer can damage joints over time. Joint protection techniques can help reduce pain, stress, and inflammation of joints. These techniques can also help prevent further deformities and increase independence in daily activities. There are many easy and inexpensive ways to protect your hands. Here are a few tips to keep your hands healthy:

## **Give your hands a break**

- If you have pain during an activity, stop the activity. Pain is one of the best ways your body has of letting you know you are causing tissue damage. Listen to and respect your pain.
- Protect the small joints of your hands by avoiding "saving time" by carrying several plastic grocery bags at once. Use paper bags, carry them one at a time, and hold them at the bottom instead of using the handles.
- If writing is painful, try using a thick, rubber grip pen with a gel tip or roller ball to decrease the amount of pressure used.
- Remember to stretch and take rest breaks every 15 minutes during repetitive or prolonged activities such as needlework, painting, sewing, knitting and crocheting, hammering and filing.
- Notice which activities aggravate your symptoms and avoid or modify them. Don't be afraid to ask others for help.
- Use pump shampoos, conditioners, and toothpaste. Use the palm of your hand to pump instead of squeezing the container.
- Use enlarged grips on everyday equipment or tools to reduce strain on joints. Examples include potato peelers, gardening tools, tooth brushes and hair brushes. If you do not want to purchase new, build up handles with foam.
- Keep scissors and knives sharp to minimize your own efforts.
- Always use two hands when lifting heavy objects. A gallon of milk weighs about eight pounds and lifting it with only your fingertips places excessive stress on hand joints
- Don't use your hand as a tool
- Don't tear your mail open. Use a letter opener to open it.
- Use utility scissors in the kitchen rather than ripping open bags.
- Always use the right tool for the job: pliers for tight pinching or a small hammer for pounding.
- Use a staple remover instead of your fingers and thumb.
- Get rid of your manual can opener - go electric! Manual can openers place excessive strain on fingers and thumb.

### Use Adaptive Equipment to Decrease Stress on your Joints

- Use devices to hold objects so you don't have to, for example: a vice - or a cutting board with picks to hold food while cutting.
- Use foam to enlarge small diameter tools like: paring knives, cutlery, toothbrushes, paint brushes, pens and pencils.
- Instead of holding open books or magazines with one hand, use a book stand or holder to bring the book to eye level. Use a book clip or "chip" clip to avoid prolonged gripping.
- Purchase lightweight kitchen, gardening, and workshop tools with built-up handles.
- Opening jars places undue stress on joints - use a non-slip jar opener.
- If you have pain when using keys to open doors, consider key extenders for keys.
- If you have difficulty opening door knobs or faucets, purchase door knob or water faucet handle extenders.
- Consider a card holder if you play cards for extended periods of time.
- Try an internet search for "adaptive equipment" to see what products are available.

### When Symptoms Become Severe

If you have already tried these techniques and still are experiencing symptoms, it may be time to consider other treatment options such as hand therapy. Certified Hand Therapists are Occupational or Physical Therapists with specialized training in treatment of hand and upper extremity conditions. Hand therapy can play an important role in the management of arthritis. Long term benefits include reducing pain, increasing motion and strength, and improving overall function. If you believe your condition is serious and would benefit from hand therapy, contact your physician and request a referral.

No matter what you're doing, take a moment to think about your hands. You'll be rewarded with happier and healthier hands; they work hard for you so treat them with love.

**Recover. Recharge. Rise<sup>®</sup>.**