

Hand & Wrist Arthritis

What You Need to Know

What Is Hand and Wrist Arthritis?

Arthritis in the hand and wrist is extremely common — the joints of the hand are among the most frequently affected in the body. There are two primary types: osteoarthritis (OA), which is wear-and-tear degeneration of the joint cartilage, and rheumatoid arthritis (RA), an autoimmune inflammatory condition that attacks the joint lining and can affect many joints simultaneously. Both cause pain, stiffness, and loss of function, but they have important differences in cause, pattern, and treatment.

Osteoarthritis of the Hand and Wrist

- Affects the fingertip joints (DIP), middle knuckles (PIP), and the base of the thumb (CMC joint) — the most common and debilitating
- Hard bony nodules at the knuckles — Heberden's nodes at fingertips, Bouchard's nodes at middle knuckles
- Thumb base arthritis: pain with pinching, gripping, turning keys — significantly impairs daily life
- Stiffness worst in the morning, improves with gentle activity
- Wrist OA: often post-traumatic (after fracture or ligament injury)

Rheumatoid Arthritis of the Hand

- Typically affects the knuckles (MCP joints) and wrist symmetrically — both hands together
- Prolonged morning stiffness — lasting more than an hour
- Warm, swollen, red joints
- Systemic symptoms — fatigue, fever, feeling unwell
- Managed in partnership with a rheumatologist — disease-modifying medications are the cornerstone of treatment

How Does Physical Therapy Help?

- Range of motion exercises — maintaining joint mobility is critical
- Strengthening — building the muscles that support arthritic joints
- Joint protection techniques — modifying how you grip, carry, and use the hand to reduce joint stress
- Splinting — custom thumb or wrist splints for support and pain reduction
- Adaptive equipment recommendations — ergonomic tools and devices to make daily tasks easier
- Manual therapy and edema management for flares

When Should I Be Concerned?

- Rapid joint deformity developing in weeks
- Systemic symptoms with joint pain — possible undiagnosed RA requiring rheumatology evaluation
- Severe functional loss limiting self-care

The Good News

Hand and wrist arthritis is very manageable. Physical therapy, joint protection strategies, and appropriate splinting help most patients maintain excellent hand function for many years. For thumb base arthritis specifically — one of the most common and disabling forms — PT is highly effective, and surgical options (when needed) have excellent outcomes.

With the right PT program and joint protection strategies, most patients with hand and wrist arthritis **maintain excellent function for many years.**

This information is for general educational purposes only and is not a substitute for a professional evaluation. Call us today — we have immediate openings with no waitlist.

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