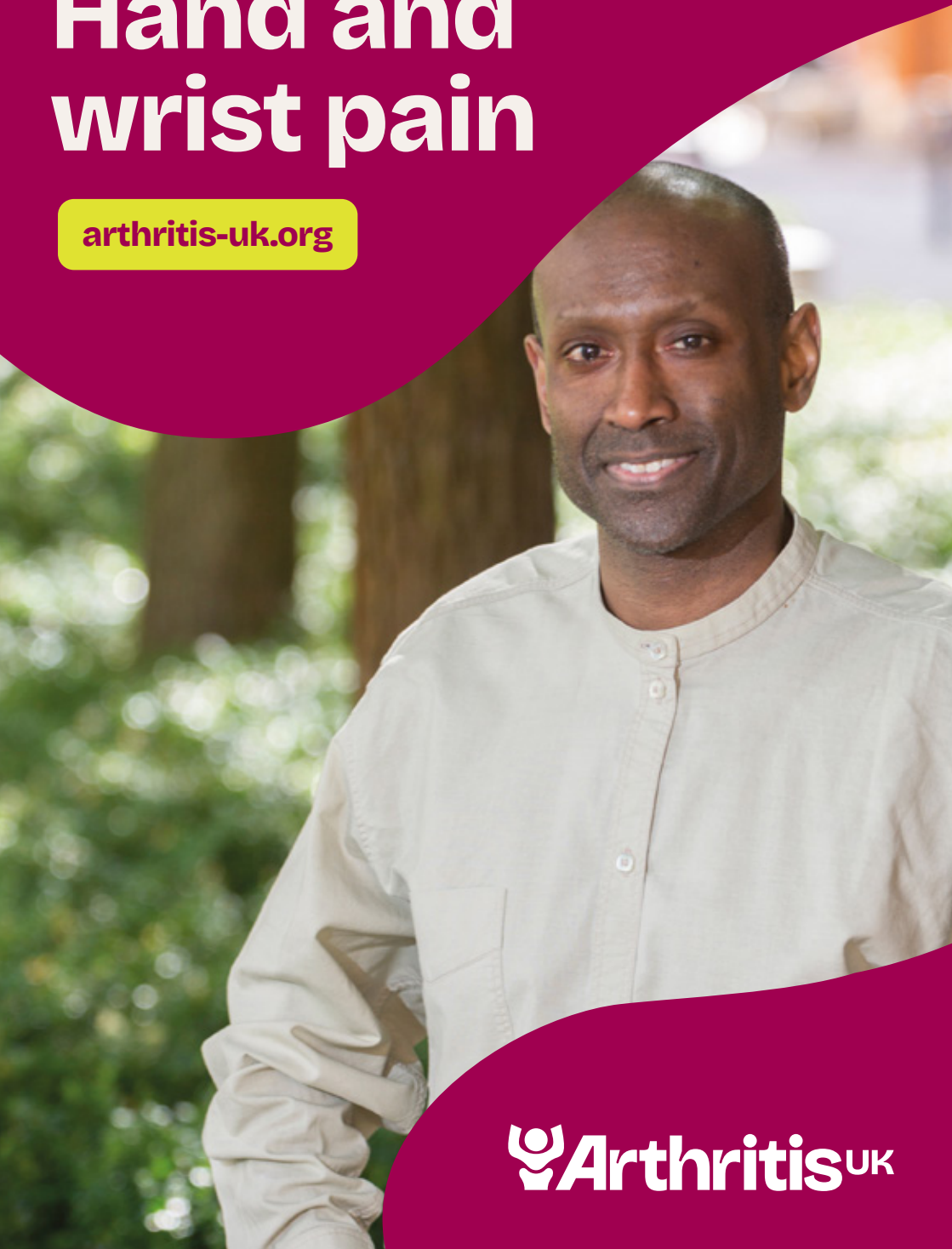
# Hand and wrist pain

arthritis-uk.org



Arthritis UK

# We are Arthritis UK

**We're the 10 million adults, young people and children living with arthritis. We're the carers, researchers and healthcare professionals. The families and the friends. All united by one powerful vision: a future free from arthritis. So that one day, no one will have to live with the physical, emotional and practical challenges that arthritis brings.**

There are many different types of arthritis. And we understand that every day is different. What's more, what works for one person may not help another. That's why our trusted information blends the latest research and expert advice with a range of lived experiences. In this way, we aim to give you everything you need to know about your condition, the treatments available and the many options you can try, so that you can make better-informed choices to suit your needs.

We're always happy to hear from you whether it's with feedback on our information, to share your story, or just to find out more about the work of Arthritis UK. **Contact us at healthinfo@arthritis-uk.org**

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# What should I know about hand and wrist pain?

**Hand and wrist pain is rarely a sign of something serious. In most cases, it will settle in a few days or weeks with some simple solutions that you can do at home.**

There are several conditions that can cause pain or other symptoms in the hands and wrists. Some types of arthritis can also affect the hands and wrists.



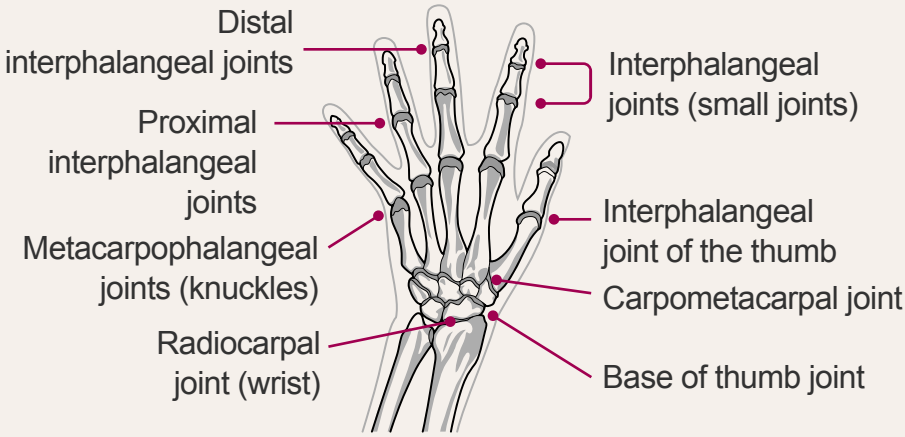
# How do the hand and wrist work?

**There are 27 small bones that make up each hand and wrist. 8 of those bones are in your wrist. Each finger has 3 bones, and the thumb has 2. There are 5 bones in the palm of your hand, connecting each finger and the thumb with the wrist.**

There are more than 30 muscles that control the hand and wrist. These are in your hands, wrists and forearms.

Muscles are attached to bones by strong cords, known as tendons. Tendons pass through a bony passage in your wrist, known as the carpal tunnel. Nerves, such as the median nerve, also pass through this tunnel.

## Figure 1. Joints of the hand and wrist



# What causes hand and wrist pain?

**There are a number of conditions that can affect the hand and wrist. Some of the most common ones are detailed below.**

## Carpal tunnel syndrome

Carpal tunnel syndrome happens when there's pressure on the median nerve as it travels through the carpal tunnel.

This can cause pins and needles, numbness, and pain or a burning sensation. You may also struggle to grip things, such as bottles.

Pain is mainly in your hand and fingers, but sometimes it can spread to the wrist, forearm and shoulder. The symptoms are usually worse at night.

If you think you have carpal tunnel syndrome, you should talk to your doctor.

It's not always possible to say exactly what's causing it. It can affect pregnant women. Carrying excess weight can also make people more likely to get carpal tunnel syndrome. Losing weight, if you need to, can help relieve symptoms.

There are some other medical conditions that can make carpal tunnel syndrome more likely, such as diabetes, an underactive thyroid and arthritis in the wrist.

People who use hand-held vibrating tools as part of their job can be at risk of carpal tunnel syndrome.

Carpal tunnel syndrome can go away in a few weeks or months.

Using a splint at night or having a steroid injection can help.

If your symptoms are more severe, or if they have not improved within 6 weeks, your doctor will refer you to a specialist. You may be offered a minor operation to relieve the pressure in the carpal tunnel.

## De Quervain's tendinopathy

De Quervain's tendinopathy can affect tendons in the wrist, causing pain around the wrist and at the base of the thumb.

Tendons have a protective covering, or sheath, with synovial fluid in. This thick fluid protects the tendon and allows it to move more easily.

Tendinopathy happens when either tendons or tendon sheaths become inflamed. This can cause pain, swelling and stiffness.

It's not always clear what causes it. It can happen if your tendons have been overused, perhaps after playing lots of sport.

Arthritis can also lead to tendinopathy. Rarely, infections can be a cause.

Pain normally eases with rest and can get worse with activity.

Applying ice wrapped in a damp towel and taking pain relief medicine or a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug (NSAID) can help. Your doctor might also suggest exercises you can do to help strengthen the muscles around the wrist, as well as wearing a splint around the thumb.

Rarely, if your pain is not getting better, you might be offered surgery.



## Trigger finger



Trigger finger causes the finger or thumb to not straighten properly. Sometimes, you might need to use your other hand to straighten it. Very occasionally, a finger may become too painful to straighten.

It's likely to be due to the swelling of a tendon or tendon sheath.

Trigger finger most commonly affects the thumb, ring finger and middle finger. More than 1 finger can be affected at the same time.

Your finger might swell, and it can be painful. There can be a clicking or popping sensation that comes from the finger, especially in the morning. Sometimes, it can lead to small lumps forming under the skin.

Trigger finger can happen for no clear reason. It's more common among women over the age of 40.

It's more likely if you've had a previous injury to the palm of your hand. Other medical conditions such as diabetes, gout, rheumatoid arthritis and an underactive thyroid may also increase someone's risk of getting it.

Trigger finger can get better without the need for treatment. But try to avoid activities that are making your symptoms worse. NSAIDs can help.

If it doesn't get better on its own and it isn't treated, it's possible for an affected thumb or finger to become permanently bent. Treatment can involve:

- steroid injections
- a splint around the finger which helps keep it straight and reduces any movement.

In some cases, a small operation can be carried out to stop the tendon from catching.

## Dupuytren's disease

Dupuytren's disease, also known as Dupuytren's contracture, can cause the fingers in either 1 or both hands to bend in towards the palm of the hand.

It's caused by tissues in the palms of the hands gradually thickening, which then pulls the fingers towards the palm. It normally affects the middle finger, ring finger and little finger.

It's more common in middle-aged men. Heavy, repetitive tasks may increase the risk of Dupuytren's.

It's not usually painful, but it can make it difficult to straighten out fingers and use your hands.

You'll only need treatment if your fingers have started to bend, or if you're unable to use your hand properly.

There are surgical options if the condition is more severe:

- a needle can be used to cut the thickened tissue, which can be done in an outpatient clinic.
- you may also be offered an operation to remove the thickened tissue.

While treatment can help ease symptoms, the condition can continue to progress. Talk to your doctor to discuss your options if your symptoms are not improving.

## Osteoarthritis

Osteoarthritis is the most common type of arthritis. It can affect hands and wrists, particularly the joints at the ends of the fingers or at the base of the thumb.

It can cause pain and stiffness, as well as making it difficult to use your hands and wrists properly.

Osteoarthritis can cause bony lumps to develop on the hands, particularly on the fingers.

If possible, it can help to avoid or adapt tasks that make the pain worse and put strain on your hands and wrists.

Keeping your hands and wrists moving as much as possible can help ease symptoms. There are some examples of simple exercises you could do at the back of the booklet. Try to do these every day.

Taking painkillers such as paracetamol, or NSAIDs such as ibuprofen can help ease pain and help you to keep moving your hands.



For more information, see the Arthritis UK booklet **Osteoarthritis of the hand and wrist** or visit: **arthritis-uk.short.gy/osteoarthritis-of-the-hand-and-wrist**



## Rheumatoid arthritis



Rheumatoid arthritis is an autoimmune condition that can cause inflammation in the joints.

This means that the immune system attacks healthy tissues in your body, rather than germs or viruses.

Rheumatoid arthritis can affect any joint in the body, although the small joints in the hands and feet are usually the first to be affected. It can affect both hands and wrists in the same way at the same time.

The symptoms often come on gradually. They include:

- joint pain
- joint swelling, warmth and redness
- stiffness, especially first thing in the morning or after sitting still for a long time.

If you get these symptoms, along with an overall feeling of being unwell and very tired, see a doctor as soon as you can.

There are drugs that can treat the underlying cause of rheumatoid arthritis, which can help stop damage to your joints. The earlier treatment is started, the more effective it's likely to be.

For more information, see the Arthritis UK booklet **Rheumatoid arthritis.** You can find all our information online at **arthritis-uk.org**

## Hand-arm vibration syndrome

Hand-arm vibration syndrome is a condition that affects some people who have regularly used vibrating tools and machinery over a period of around 10 years or more. These tools include pneumatic drills, power drills and chainsaws.

The early symptoms are loss of feeling, known as numbness, and pins and needles in the fingers. Symptoms are often mild, affecting only the ends of your fingers.

But it can cause your fingers to go numb and your grip strength to weaken. This can make tasks such as doing up buttons and picking up small objects difficult.

It might be caused by repeated minor injuries to the small nerves and blood vessels in the fingers.

Hand-arm vibration syndrome can lead to another condition called Raynaud's phenomenon, which you can read about below.

If you think you have symptoms of hand-arm vibration, see a doctor and report it to your manager if you think it's being caused by something you do at work.

You might need to stop using vibrating tools and machinery to stop your condition getting worse.





## Raynaud's phenomenon

Raynaud's phenomenon is a condition that causes blood to stop flowing properly to the outer parts of the body, including the fingers.

This can happen when you get cold, and it can also happen when you're stressed.

The most common thing to happen is for your fingers, or sometimes toes, to change colour. Usually they will go white, then blue, sometimes black, and then red. Colour changes are less obvious if your skin is darker, but your fingers will look paler. These skin colour changes often occur alongside pain or a tingling feeling.

In most cases the cause is unknown, and Raynaud's can occur on its own. This is known as primary Raynaud's.

People with lupus or scleroderma can develop Raynaud's as a complication. This is known as secondary Raynaud's. Rarely, secondary Raynaud's can start before the other medical condition.

Primary Raynaud's is usually not serious, and the symptoms can be managed.

Secondary Raynaud's can cause ulcers and sores that need treating.

Keeping warm in cold weather can help reduce the chances of an attack of Raynaud's. Wearing several layers of clothing, as well as a hat, scarf and gloves, will help. Reusable or disposable hand warmers and heated gloves can help too.

Exercising regularly is good for your circulation.

Smoking is very bad for your circulation and can make Raynaud's much worse. If you smoke, quitting can be the best thing you do. Your GP will be able to offer advice and support. There's useful information at **nhs.uk/better-health/quit-smoking**

There are drugs available, such as nifedipine, which can improve your blood flow. These will need to be prescribed by a doctor.

# Should I see a doctor?

## Hand and wrist pain usually gets better on its own without needing to see a doctor.

Speak to your GP if:

- the pain is stopping you from doing your everyday activities
- your hands are stiff and swollen, particularly in the mornings, and there's little improvement within half an hour
- your hands are warm and red
- you also feel generally unwell, especially if you have a fever
- you have ongoing tingling, numbness or weakness in the hands or fingers.

You should get urgent medical attention if:

- you think you've broken a bone
- you are in severe pain
- any part of your hand, wrist or fingers has changed shape or colour
- you have lost the feeling in part or all of your hand
- there was a snap, grinding or popping noise when you injured your hand or wrist
- you struggle to move your hand, wrist or fingers properly.

Hand therapists are experts in treating hand and wrist conditions. If you're experiencing long-term pain or you have a specific condition, it is worth speaking with your healthcare team about referring you to one.

Occupational therapists are trained to help if you're having difficulties with everyday tasks. You can be referred through your GP, or you might be able to see one through Social Services, depending on your situation.

Your workplace might have access to occupational therapy, or you could pay for private treatment. You can find one by visiting the Royal College of Occupational Therapists' website: **rcot.co.uk**



# How are hand and wrist conditions diagnosed?

**Your doctor or a specialised physiotherapist will want to hear about your symptoms and how long you've had them for.**

They will examine your hand and wrist, checking the range of movement, feeling and strength.

You may be offered blood tests to look for inflammation markers.

X-rays, ultrasound scans, computerised tomography (CT) scans and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scans are sometimes used to help doctors have a closer look at what's happening inside your hand and wrist.



# How can I manage my hand and wrist pain?

## There are some simple steps you can take to ease most hand and wrist pain.

But if you're ever struggling, talk to a healthcare professional, such as a GP or physiotherapist.

## Try to reduce tasks that make the pain worse

Try to avoid tasks that are causing the pain or making it worse, or change the way you do them to reduce strain on your hands and wrists. This may be anything repetitive, such as using tools, painting or lifting heavy objects.

## Pain relief medicines

Pain relief medicines such as paracetamol, and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), like ibuprofen, are usually recommended first for hand and wrist pain. There are NSAID gels you can rub into your hand and wrist. There are also tablets you can swallow.

If you are using pain relief medicines, follow the instructions on when and how much to take. This can make it easier to keep moving and continue with everyday activities.

Be careful not to combine gels and tablets, as both get into your bloodstream. You should always read the information that comes with any medication, particularly about dosages.

If you have any questions or concerns, talk to a doctor or pharmacist.



You can find more information on pain relief medicines on our website: **arthritis-uk.org/painkillers-and-nsaids**

## Ice and heat

An ice pack bought from a pharmacy, or even just a bag of frozen peas, can help to reduce pain and ease swelling.

Applying a heat pack to the affected area can ease pain and stiffness. You can buy a reusable heat pad from a pharmacy, or you can use a microwavable wheat bag or a hot-water bottle.

A warm bath or hot shower can have a similar soothing effect. Moving your hand around in a bowl of warm water can be helpful too. Don't apply heat to your hand or wrist if it's swollen or if you've just injured it though, as this can make it worse.

Wax baths are another form of heat therapy that can relieve pain and stiffness, especially before you exercise your hands. Ask your GP, a pharmacist or a hand therapist where you can buy one and how to use it. You should avoid them if you have cuts or open sores.

You may find it helpful to use heat and ice at different times, depending on what feels most comfortable. You might also find that one is more helpful for you than the other.

Make sure you protect your skin from direct contact with heat or ice packs to avoid damage to your skin. A tea towel over the heat or ice pack is one way to do that. Read the instructions carefully if you have bought a heat or ice therapy product.

Applying ice or heat for about 15 to 20 minutes, every few hours, is usually enough.

## Wearing splints

Splints can provide support to the hand and wrist. Some can be used when you're carrying out everyday activities and some are just for when you're sleeping and resting.

A hand therapist, physiotherapist or occupational therapist can give you advice on whether a splint could help, which type would be good for you and how to use it.

## Keep moving your hands and wrists

Try to move your hands, wrists and fingers often.

Moving them helps ease pain and stiffness, as well as helping you to maintain your range of movement, function and strength.

This booklet contains some exercises you can do at home. Try to do them regularly, especially if your hands and wrists are feeling stiff.

If you have carpal tunnel syndrome, talk to a physiotherapist, GP or hand therapist for advice on exercise.

Scan here to find our exercise videos:

You can view our exercises for the hands and wrists online at **arthritis-uk.short.gy/exercises-for-the-fingers-hands-and-wrists**

# What if my hand and wrist pain is affecting my work?

## Getting back to work, or staying in work, often helps people recover more quickly from hand and wrist pain.

It's a good idea to be in your normal routine as much as possible, and as soon as possible.

If there are tasks that make your pain worse, try to do them slightly differently to take the strain off your hands and wrists. You may have to take some pain relief medicines. Ask for help if you are struggling with any tasks.

It's important to keep in contact with your employer and discuss what can be done to help you return to work. If your work involves heavy lifting or other physically demanding tasks, you may need to do lighter duties or fewer hours for a while.

If you have an occupational health advisor through your job, they can advise on what work you're able to do safely and arrange any simple adjustments to your work or workplace to help you stay at work.

Ask for a workplace assessment and tell whoever carries it out about your hand and wrist pain. Try to take regular breaks and rest your hands and wrists. Maybe set a timer on your phone or computer to remind you to do this at least once an hour.

If you're having any difficulties travelling to or from work or need an item of equipment, the Government's Access to Work Scheme (**gov.uk/access-to-work**) might be able to help.

If you're unable to get back to work after 2 weeks of absence because of your hand and wrist pain, you should talk to your GP and employer about arranging physiotherapy or other treatment to get you moving again.

Our work adjustment plan offers help and guidance around working with arthritis: **arthritis-uk.short.gy/work-adjustment-plan**



# Exercises for hand and wrist pain

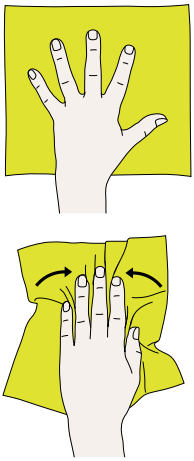
**These exercises are designed to keep the hand and wrist flexible.**

It's important to work within your pain limits and not to overstretch. A little bit of pain or discomfort while you're exercising doesn't mean you're doing yourself any harm. Remember it's best to keep moving as much as you can, as otherwise your symptoms could get worse.

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

You should stop and seek advice if you have severe pain during or after exercise, or if the pain doesn't go away after a few days.

## Finger strengthening

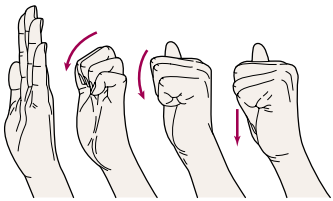


Begin with the palm of your hand on a tissue or towel on a table, your fingers apart.

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, simply by pressing down on the table and squeezing your fingers together, then stretching them apart.

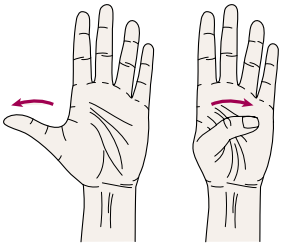
## Finger stretching



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.

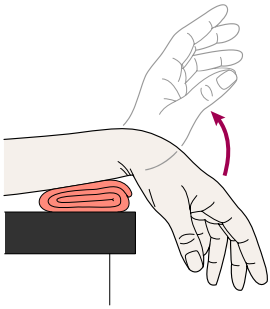
## Thumb stretch



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.

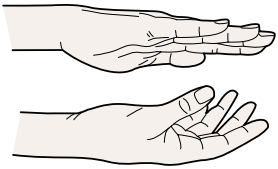
## Hand lift



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 upwards until you feel a gentle stretch, then return to the starting position.

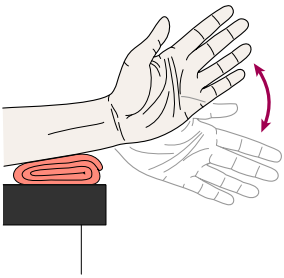
## Wrist twist



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, without lifting your forearm from the table.

# Research and new developments

## Our research is helping us understand more about hand and wrist conditions and find better ways to treat and manage them.

Research at our Pathogenesis Centre has looked at whether retinoic acid, which is made from vitamin A, could help people with osteoarthritis of the hand.

Arthritis UK is also a partner in the D-MAPP project, which is exploring digital support for people with conditions including osteoarthritis of the hand, thumb and wrist, carpal tunnel syndrome and tendinopathy.

We're also funding research into new ways to manage hand and wrist pain, including non-surgical treatments for carpal tunnel syndrome.



# Notes

# Discover our support services

**You don’t need to face arthritis alone. Get the information, advice and support that you need.**



Call our free helpline:
**0800 5200 520**



Connect with our online community, go to:
**community.arthritis-uk.org**



Chat with AVA, our online assistant, go to:
**arthritis-uk.org/ask-AVA-our-virtual-assistant**



Track your symptoms with our easy app, go to:
**arthritis-uk.org/track-my-arthritis-symptoms-app**

# Thank you!

## A team of people helped us create this booklet. We would like to thank:

**Jaj Mankelow**

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**Stacey Devine**

We would also like to give a special thank you to Stephen Clark and Stephen Dickson, who shared their stories, opinions and thoughts on the booklet. Your contributions make sure the information we provide is relevant and suitable for everyone.



# Support our work

At Arthritis UK we rely on donations to fund our work. Help support people with arthritis and fund life-changing research by making a donation today. Every contribution makes a difference.

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Sign up today and we'll be in touch by email a few times a month with the latest arthritis news, including research and campaign updates, as well as tips and advice about how to live well with arthritis, and ways you can get involved.

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