

Thumb Osteoarthritis

Arthritis in the thumb is one of the most common forms of osteoarthritis affecting the hand. This form of arthritis occurs whenever the cushioning cartilage ends up wearing away from the connecting ends of the bones forming the thumb joint. The condition can cause severe pain in the hand, decrease in strength, swelling and decreased movement, which makes it quite difficult to do normal household tasks such as opening jars or turning a doorknob.

Treating thumb arthritis includes a number of self-care measures, medication, splints and injections. If you have a severe case of arthritis, you might have to undergo surgery.

Thumb Osteoarthritis Anatomy

The thumb is the first and most important digit in the hand. Because the thumb has rotated 90 degrees, it allows movement called opposition which allows us to use tools. Without the thumb, we would have a very basic grip. With the thumb, our hands become skilled allowing delicate movements such as using tools, and playing instruments.

There are two bones in the thumb. The first one is the distal phalange extending from the top of the thumb and down to the knuckle. The second one is the proximal phalange extending from the knuckle down to the base of the thumb. This is the webbed area located between the first finger and the thumb. The thumb is connected to a bone in the hand.

Arthritis of the thumb is common.

There are a Number of Common Causes:

1. Wear and tear – most commonly, decades of over-use can cause the cartilage to wear. Massage therapists, dentists, sportspeople, and musicians can all be affected.
2. After injury or fracture – sometimes the thumb is injured decades earlier but never made a full recovery, or was left weak. Thumb fractures in particular can lead to arthritis later down the line (usually two or more decades later).
3. Rheumatoid arthritis – this inflammatory arthritis often affects the hand and fingers joints causing swelling and bony nodules around the finger and thumb joints.

Why does thumb arthritis cause pain? When the cartilage around the thumb starts to degenerate, inflammation can be produced and this is painful. The thumb can become stiff and slightly swollen. As further degeneration occurs, the body tends to lay down bony deposits around the thumb causing thickening (or hypertrophy) of the thumb joint. This leads to further stiffness.

How to Treat Thumb Osteoarthritis:

1. Splints

It might be necessary to wear a splint to help support the joint and minimize movement in the wrist and thumb. Splints will help to decrease the pain, encourage the proper position of the joints and allow the joints time to rest. Depending on your particular needs, you might have to wear a splint in the evening or throughout the entire day.

2. Anti-Inflammatory Medication

To help relieve pain and inflammation, an anti-inflammatory medication might prove beneficial, but consider the use to be short term. Anti-inflammatory gels can also help, such as ibulieve. Ask your doctor for advice.

3. Injections

If a combination of different medications and the splint isn't helpful, you might need to have a long-acting corticosteroid injected into the joint. These injections can often help to relieve pain temporarily and reduce the constant inflammation.

4. Therapy

Hand therapists and physiotherapists often treat thumb injuries as well as arthritis. Although arthritis cannot be reversed, it can be managed. While managing may involve treatment, reducing inflammation, improving range of mobility, and strengthening exercises. This can help reduce the further onset of osteoarthritis.

5. Surgery

If you aren't responding well to the other treatments, or you are barely able to twist and bend the thumb, you might have no other option beyond surgery. You can discuss which procedure is going to work the best for your particular situation.

Tips:

- Engage in movement exercises that allow your thumb to move through the full range of motion to help with improving mobility.
- Consider purchasing key tuners, jar openers and larger zipper pulls that are created for those with a limited amount of strength in their hands.
- Replace traditional handles in your home with levers that are easier to open.
- Use either heat or cold to help soothe the joints and alleviate swelling, or use contrast bathing. This involves placing your hands into a basin of cold water for two minutes, then hot water for two minutes, then cold water. This can help reduce inflammation.
- Avoid clenching your hand when you are trying to carry something.
- Contrast bathing (using cold and hot water) can help, ask your Rehab My Patient therapist for more advice.

