

TO YOUR HEALTH

Carleton-Willard Village Out-Patient Clinic • 100 Old Billerica Rd., Bedford, MA 01730

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LOOSING YOUR GRIP by Barbara Chenoweth, NP

One of the first signs of arthritis of the hands is the sensation of weakness, losing one's grip. Or maybe it's just that the lids or the packaging have become stronger and harder to open, even for younger people. While there may be some truth to this, arthritis of the hands affects most people if they live long enough. And loss of strength is often the first sign.

Pain, stiffness and deformity may develop and cause one to lose the ability to use the hands in ways that were taken for granted in the past. Painful hands can adversely affect everything from how we work to how we communicate and express ourselves. Some of these arthritic changes can be attributed to the wear and tear on the hand joints.

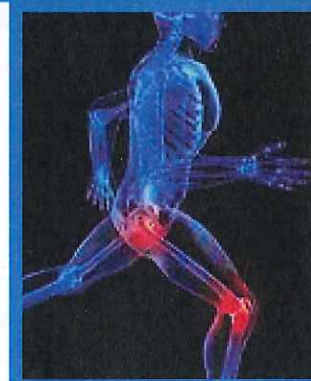
Our everyday life and activities place considerable stress and strain on the joints of the hands as well as on the tendons of the wrist. Repetitive motions from long hours on the computer with awkward posture, overly forceful movements, and limited breaks contribute to painful hands. Sustained gripping of the computer mouse, incorrect key positions, and motions such as typing or entering figures on a calculator are all

culprits. Cell phones, smart phones, electronic planners, and digital music players often lead to excessive gripping, thereby straining the hands. Less high-tech activities like gardening, digging, home repair, or straining to open jars



can equally place stress on the joints.

As these stresses place pressure and torque on the joints, the cartilage that cushions the joints begins to erode, and the bones start to rub together. This eventually produces pain, swelling, and stiffness. Bone spurs and deformity of the hands become more obvious and visible than the changes that accompany arthritis of the hip or knee joints, (*Arthritis Advisor*, April 2011).



If a person has sustained a wrist fracture in the past, it is not uncommon to develop arthritis at the site of the old fracture. It can be noticed when the usual tasks of turning a doorknob or carrying a grocery bag become painful and difficult, (*Mayo Clinic Health Letter*, January 2011).

The wrist is a complicated joint composed of eight small, roundish bones. Arthritis of the wrist is more likely to occur from an old injury than from normal wear and tear of the wrist. However, carpal tunnel syndrome, a consequence of repetitive movements, is a nerve impingement in the wrist that causes numbness and weakness in the fingers. Eventually, it also produces nerve pain, pins and needles or tingling in the fingers. Rheumatoid arthritis, an auto-immune disorder, is another form of arthritis, but is characterized by warm, painful, and swollen joints. This type of arthritis is a disease that affects more than one joint as well as the immune system, and requires specialized treatment by a Rheumatologist.

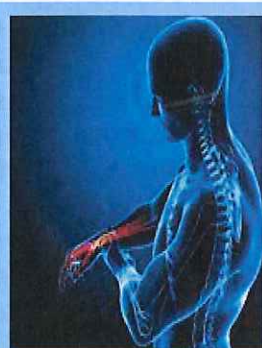


However, the garden variety of arthritis and the type most people get is different. It occurs from too much strain and overuse of the hands. Prevention is an essential part of the treatment. Joint protection is a way

of living that minimizes stress to hands by avoiding jarring motions, repetitive motion, and overuse. Special jar openers, lever-style door handles and other devices can decrease stress on the hands. Avoiding any movement that causes hand pain is important.

If the joints are not inflamed, stretching and strengthening exercises are helpful. Opening and closing the hand or touching the tips of each finger to the thumb can improve dexterity, maintain flexibility and ease pain. Immersing the hands in warm water before doing the exercises relaxes the muscles and takes the tension off the tendons and ligaments. Sometimes splints can provide support to weakened and painful hand joints. Special products that enlarge the size of pencils, pens, tools, keys and sports equipment allow less effort and stress on the joint when they are grasped.

Pain medicine such as Tylenol (acetaminophen) or anti-inflammatory drugs like Advil or Ibuprofen can offer temporary pain relief. Since anti-inflammatory medicines are not without their side effects, they should only be taken with the supervision of a health care provider. Topical creams, gels, and sprays can be just as effective and have less side effects. Likewise,



applying heat or cold on a regular basis can also help.

When these measures do not relieve hand pain, seeing a hand specialist may be the next step. Rarely is surgery a necessity, but corticosteroid injections often reduce pain and swelling for weeks or months. The injections sometimes can be repeated. Occupational therapists are a good resource for an exercise program and can recommend and fit splints that rest joints.



If hand pain, stiffness or weakness become problematic, remember there are many ways the hands can be treated; do not suffer in silence! Seek out medical advice and help.

HEALTH EDUCATION TALK

On Wednesday, March 6, Peter Spiers will discuss "Master Class: Living Longer, Stronger, and Happier." His book, *Master Class*, describes his study of successful aging and how people can plan their own lives to become more successful. Join us for what is certain to be an interesting and stimulating discussion from 10:30-11:30 am in Center Auditorium.

CLINIC NEWS

The Clinic continues to be open every Saturday from 9 am to 12 pm. Any changes will be announced in BITS. You can make an appointment to see the Nurse Practitioner or walk-in if you are experiencing an illness.