

Holding on to Hand Strength

What could be giving you the "dropsies" — and how to rebuild muscle and maintain dexterity

by Sandra Lamb, **AARP**, November 18, 2020



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En español | Does squeezing and turning the cap on the prescription drug bottle seem a little tougher lately? How about opening that jar of tomato sauce? Are you struggling to close the buttons on your favorite shirt? Trouble with gripping, grabbing, pinching and holding things can happen at any age, but “it’s around age 60 when we commonly see symptoms of hand-strength loss and loss of dexterity,” says Kia Washington, M.D., associate professor of surgery at the University of Colorado School of Medicine. Age-related loss of muscle is one culprit, she explains; others include individual levels of wear and tear and certain health conditions. Here’s what to know to hold on to as much strength, dexterity and flexibility as possible.

Health conditions that can hurt your hands

Osteoarthritis With osteoarthritis, “the protective cartilage that cushions joints wears away,” causing pain and weakness, says Washington. Steven Goldberg, M.D., chair of the American Society for Surgery of the Hand (ASSH) Patient Education Committee, adds that hands may swell after a full day and, particularly in the morning, finger joints may get stiff.

Quick Tips for Hand Health

- For heavy lifting, use large muscles and two hands.
- Alternate big household tasks with smaller ones, and take breaks in between.
- Plan out the setup of your [computer workstation](#). (See also [mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/adult-health/in-depth/office-ergonomics/art-20046169](https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/adult-health/in-depth/office-ergonomics/art-20046169))
- Put down the phone and use the speaker option.
- Stretch and move for 10 minutes once an hour.
- Use electric can openers, jar-opening aids and faucet levers to ease pressure on joints.
- Apply heat to hand in the morning to loosen joints and reduce stiffness.
- Apply ice to hand after injury or if you've overused it.

Carpal tunnel syndrome This disorder occurs when the median nerve that runs from the neck to the thumb, index, middle finger and half of the ring finger gets compressed at the wrist, causing hand pain, weakness, numbness or tingling. Your fingers may also feel swollen, tight or stiff, and you may experience a loss of thumb dexterity and strength in particular, which may cause you to lose your grip.

Cubital tunnel syndrome In this case the ulnar nerve, which runs from the wrist to the neck and is responsible for the hand's nerve and muscle function, becomes inflamed and compressed at the elbow. Pain radiates down from the inside of the elbow to the forearm into the small and ring fingers and the back of the hand, causing pain and difficulty in grasping objects. In cubital tunnel syndrome, hand weakness is more prominent than it is in carpal tunnel syndrome.

Osteoporosis This disease causes bones to become weak and brittle when the creation of new bone doesn't keep up with the loss of old bone. The loss of bone density can put your hands at risk because a fall or even minor stress can potentially result in a hand or wrist fracture.

Rheumatoid arthritis This chronic inflammatory disease can attack the lining of the joints and tendons, along with other parts of the body. [Rheumatoid arthritis](#) often affects smaller joints first, such as the ones that attach your fingers to your hands, causing pain, weakness, stiffness and swelling.



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Treatment for hand pain, hand weakness and more

Early diagnosis is key and will determine what course of treatment is recommended. Your primary care physician may refer you to a hand surgeon for a diagnosis. (You can find a hand surgeon near you at handcare.org.) Seeing a surgeon doesn't mean you're signing up for a procedure, Goldberg notes. "Over 70 percent of my patients don't require surgery," he says, but "depending on the specific joint, there are different surgeries, such as implant arthroplasties and fusions, that can relieve pain." Carpal tunnel syndrome and cubital tunnel syndrome are examples of conditions that may be improved with surgery.

For pain, swelling, weakness or other symptoms in your hands, as with osteoarthritis, the usual treatment plan includes over-the-counter (OTC) medication, such as acetaminophen, as well as nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, or NSAIDs, like ibuprofen (Advil) and indomethacin (Tivorbex). Your doctor may also prescribe pain medications. Sometimes splints and compression gloves are recommended, as are exercise and physical therapy. For more severe hand pain, steroid injections may be used.

Just Squeeze: Using Putty to Strengthen Hands

1. Soften hand-therapy putty (available from Amazon or other sources) to room temperature.
2. Use fingers and thumb to squeeze putty 12 times with each hand, relaxing between squeezes.
3. Roll putty back and forth with each hand 12 times.
4. Pinch putty between thumb and forefinger 12 times.
5. Shape the putty into a thick pancake form and put it on a table. Place your fingertips together into the putty and spread out all the fingers at once, enlarging the pancake as much as possible. Repeat 12 times.

When your hands are affected by conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis, other specialists may be required. You'll be referred to a rheumatologist, who can prescribe and monitor oral and injectable medications, Goldberg says. In the case of osteoporosis, your primary care provider or an endocrinologist will manage the condition, possibly giving you a bone density scan and/or X-rays to decide what to prescribe (for example, extra calcium, vitamin D or bisphosphonates, to combat fragility).

Four key moves for hand strength

“Physical activity helps to keep joints working smoothly,” Washington advises. [Resistance and weight-bearing exercises](#) in particular can keep loss of muscle mass to a minimum.

For optimal hand health, says Suzanne Brand, occupational therapist at Beth Israel Deaconess Hospital in Needham, Massachusetts, “you can't just isolate the hand.” With its complex structure — three joints in each finger and two in the thumb — the hand is part of a kinetic chain that starts in the shoulders. Brand suggests four arm and shoulder exercises that can keep your hands limber and pain-free. Repeat these 12 times a day.

- Lift and roll shoulders up and back.
- Pinch shoulder blades together.
- Raise arms forward and straight up in “touchdown” position.
- Straighten and sweep arms above head like you're making a snow angel.