



## **OSTEOARTHRITIS OF THE THUMB**

### **DEFINITION OF OSTEOARTHRITIS**

Osteoarthritis is commonly seen in adults and is predominately a disease of the articular cartilage of a joint. It results in degeneration of the joint surfaces and pain and swelling which affects function and the use of the hand.

There are a few things you can consider which will assist in managing your pain, They are the most conservative methods of managing osteoarthritis of the thumb and will often be tried prior to other medical treatment. We are not able to reverse the arthritic changes but aim to prevent deformity, minimise pain and maximise function.

There are a number of principles to be aware of:

### **1. AVOID GRIPPING NARROW OR SMALL OBJECTS TIGHTLY**

If you grip something that is small and narrow it takes a great deal of power to hold and manipulate it. More power generally means more pain and increased force and strain on the joints. Additionally, if the object is made of metal or plastic (eg pens and toothbrushes), it can be slippery, making a functional grip more difficult to achieve.

To improve this situation you can:

- A) Add grip onto slippery surfaces by wrapping elastoplast around the handle or buying products which have a high friction grip
- B) Widening the grip of an object using foam tubing or grip aids. Your therapist will guide you on this.

Equipment available

- Adapted cutlery
- Pill cutters
- Large handled plug
- Card holder
- Large handled potato peeler

## **2. SPREAD THE STRAIN**

The larger joints in the body and arm have larger muscles to support and move them. Try to use your shoulder, hips and anything else you can think of to do things such as opening doors and closing drawers. Secondly, the more joints involved in any activity, the less strain each one takes individually. For example, if you are holding a plate, try to use the flat of both hands rather than just the thumb, index and middle fingers of one hand.

There are many examples like this:

- Use your forearms and shoulders to carry towels and bags
- Use both hands for activities where possible
- Use equipment designed to encourage you to use the larger joints in the arm to take the greatest strain

## **3. ENERGY CONSERVATION**

There are two principles involved here:

- A) Firstly, prioritise your activities and avoid unnecessary ones which will exacerbate your thumb pain. Organise items needed for an activity to eliminate unnecessary lifting. You may need to change the way you do things and your therapist will discuss this with you. Ask for help from those around you! Make a plan of activities which need to be done, both rest and leisure as well as work chores. Try and divide weekly heavy jobs such as shopping, washing, cleaning through the week rather than attempting all activities in a few hours and increasing your pain.
- B) Secondly, balance rest and activity. If you are doing something which gives you pain, rest every 10 - 15 minutes for a brief period. Changing the task regularly can also help by altering your work patterns to intersperse light activities and heavier ones, or breaking heavier tasks into small components, for example, vegetables for the evening meal can be prepared in the afternoon. This can help allow your joints to have a frequent change in movement patterns and strains.

## **4. USE YOUR SPLINTS**

If you have splints, use them. They are designed either to rest inflamed joints, support weaknesses or prevent and contain deformities. If the splints are not comfortable you must contact your hand therapist for an alteration. Make sure that you understand exactly what the splints are supposed to be doing for you.

The most commonly worn splints are thumb post splints which can be made from neoprene (more flexible) or thermoplastic (more support). They are made to support your weak joint(s) in the thumb and are used when working.

