5 Exercises for RA You Can Do to Strengthen Your Hands

by EFFIE KOLIOPOULOS

Hand Exercises for Rheumatoid Arthritis

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is a chronic inflammatory disease that affects over 1.5 million Americans. RA can affect any joint, but the hands are among the most affected area of the body. Symptoms in the hand is the most common presentation of RA and deformities of the hand occur in most of people with RA. When the hands are involved, even the simplest task can be difficult or painful. Many patients with RA have some type of loss of function in their hand, leading to difficulty completes their activities of daily living. This loss of function often starts soon after RA is diagnosed. Symptoms of RA in the hand can include joint swelling, pain with movement of the hand, joint stiffness, weakness and loss of function and deformity of the joints and fingers. To help these symptoms, there are hand exercises for rheumatoid arthritis.

Managing Rheumatoid Arthritis Symptoms in Your Hands

When RA affects your hands, treatment includes regular RA medications to alleviate your overall symptoms and can decrease the frequency of flares. Hand exercises for rheumatoid arthritis, either with the help of a physical therapist or at home, can improve hand function and decrease the symptoms and pain that people experience. These hand exercises focus on increasing range of motion and improving strength. They have been found to improve grip strength and decrease pain when done regularly.

Heather Williams, DPT, a physical therapist at the Hospital for Special Surgery says, “Studies have shown that strengthening the muscles around the joints leads to overall improved function and better quality of life. Patients can be afraid to exercise those joints because of pain, but they really benefit from strengthening exercises.”

The Hand Exercise Process

These exercises, when started after you are on a stable medication routine, can be done under the supervision of an occupational or physical therapist. Ideally, these exercises should be under the supervision of a therapist who can tailor the exercises to your specific needs and teach you how to adapt the exercises if you are having a flare.

You can start doing exercises to help strengthen your hands at home, as long as you start slowly and stop if you experience pain or a worsening of your symptoms. You should try to do these exercises every day, even if your hands feel stiff. You may experience slight pain after you do the exercises. If the pain continues, decrease the length of time you do these exercises the next session. If the pain continues to increase, you may need to call your doctor or occupational therapist.

Start with one repetition of each exercise and increase to two or three repetitions as you get more used to the exercises. Start slowly with each exercise, only stretching as far as is comfortable. Here are a “handful” of exercises that you can do at home to improve your range of motion and hand strength.

1. Fingertip Touches

This requires you to sit in a comfortable chair with your hands in your lap or on a table with your palms up. Slowly touch each fingertip to your thumb, starting with your index finger. Once you touch your thumb, slowly open your hand back up. Repeat with each finger on each hand.

2. Make a Fist

For this exercise, hold your hands straight out in front of you with your fingers outstretched. Then, slowly bend your fingers until you make a fist, with your thumb on the outside of your other fingers. You can then slowly open your hand back up until your fingers are straight again. Do this with the other hand too.

3. Finger Bends

Sit in a comfortable chair with your hands in your lap or on a table with your palms up. Make sure all these movements are done slowly. To start, bend your thumb towards your palm, moving it as close to your palm that you can and hold for a few seconds. Then, move your thumb back to its original position. You can then bend your index finger towards your palm, moving it as close to your palm as you can. Hold it for a few seconds and then slowly move it back to its original position. Repeat this with your middle finger, ring finger and pinkie, and be sure to do this with your other hand as well.

4. Finger Lifts

To begin, sit in a comfortable chair with your hands on a table with your palms down, with your fingers spread apart. One at a time, slowly lift each finger one at a time as high as you can. Keep your other fingers as flat as possible. Hold for a few seconds and then slowly lower your finger back to the table.

5. Squeeze the Towel

This one may sound funny and requires you to place a small towel flat on a table. Then, put your hands on the towel, palm down. Slowly, start to cup your hand while you gather the towel into your palm. You can then squeeze the towel into your palm gently and hold for a few seconds. Make sure to repeat this with your other hand.

Talk to Your Doctor

Remember to take these slowly and talk to your doctor or physical therapist if you experience an increase in pain or swelling in your hands. When done slowly and consistently, these exercises may be able to slow the progress of RA in your hands.