

Arthritis at the Base of the Thumb

Arthritis at the base of the thumb is a very common condition. Pain is often one of the primary presenting symptoms but you may find this varies depending on activity, time of day or other factors. You may also find that your range of movement in the thumb decreases and your grip strength becomes weaker.

Pain

Pain present at the base of the thumb can limit day to day function. A sustained grip, against resistance, for a long period of time can be a trigger such as carrying a bag. The Symptoms tend to worsen as the condition progresses.
How to manage your Pain

There are different approaches to manage your pain.

- **Application of hot packs for 10 to 15 minutes.** This can be hot water bottle or a warm wheat bag wrapped around your thumb.
- **Immersing hand in hot water** (as hot as you can tolerate) and squeezing a sponge in hot water may also assist with pain relief. Squeeze sponge in hot water for 5 minutes, followed by pinching the sponge with tip of thumb against the tip of each individual finger. Carry out this exercise for a further 5 minutes.
- **Painkillers** can be used on a regular basis. During an inflammatory episode it is advised to take painkillers every four hours for the following week as directed by your pharmacist. This can help to decrease pain and inflammation. Consult your GP for advice regarding the most appropriate analgesia.
- If the pain is severe, **an injection may help to relieve symptoms**, however this can only be possible if there is still space at the joint. With this type of injection, steroid is mixed with local anaesthetic. This type of management is purely for pain relief. Joint injections do not cure the cause of arthritis.
- Application of pressure over the *Figure 1* trigger points may also assist with pain relief. (add alongside picture) Apply pressure over the first web space by pinching the painful thumb firmly with the opposite thumb. Hold for 30 seconds and repeat for 10 times

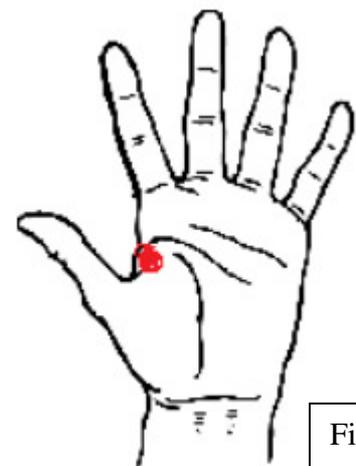


Figure 1

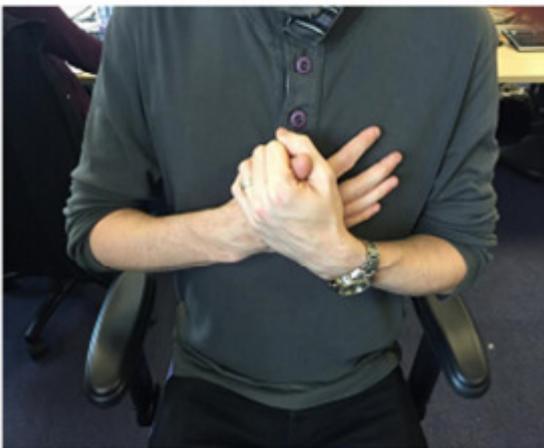


Distraction of the joint

Grasp thumb with opposite hand, either behind your back or in front, whichever is most comfortable.

At the back of the body: Let the weight of your arms pull the thumb away from the hand. Hold for 30 seconds and repeat 10 times. See picture

At the front of the body: Pull the thumb away from the hand. This will help to create some space within the joint. Hold for 30 seconds and repeat 10 times See picture



Thumb Exercises

Movement of the thumb is very important in day to day function. The following exercises can help maintain and improve the movement in your thumb. These exercises should ideally be carried out after warming up your hand by using either a hot pack as described above. It is quite common that your hands/ thumb can feel uncomfortable or slightly painful when carrying out these exercises so start gently and gradually progress. You should feel an increase in pain for no longer than 20 minutes after the exercises.

Exercise 1.

Thumb Abduction/ Adduction



Place hand sideways on a surface. Apply pressure over the base of the nail of the thumb, push thumb away from the palm. Repeat for 10 times. As pain starts to decrease, and you feel more comfortable with these exercises, apply some resistance against the tip of thumb and do the same described movement to strengthen the joint. The amount of resistance should be enough to avoid/ produce any pain over the base of thumb.

Thumb Extension

Repeat the exercise above but this time bring your thumb up towards the ceiling. As before add resistance once you feel comfortable.

Palmar abduction



Move the thumb towards little finger to touch the tip of the little finger then lift thumb back to the original position of the exercise. Make sure you are not overstretching your thumb at the middle knuckle and try to keep your thumb straight as you do the exercise. This will protect your joints and soft tissues (i.e. ligaments). Repeat 10 times.

Thumb opposition



Touch tip of thumb to tip of index finger to form an 'O'. Hold this position for 3 seconds, then let go. Repeat 10 times. As before you can add some pressure 'pinching' thumb and finger together in the 'O' shape and holding for 3 seconds, 10 times.

Web space exercises



Bend your fingers at the knuckles but keep the rest of your fingers straight. away from the index finger. Push your thumb into your index finger to squeeze together. And hold for 3 seconds. Repeat 10 times

Activity Modification

If a specific activity or task aggravates your thumb pain, it may help to modify these activities. Here are some examples below and suggestions to help:

- Gripping activities: Try to use the palm of both hands to open jars or bottles
- Try to scoop objects using fingers, if pain is present at the base of the thumb
- Use assistive devices such as for opening tins

Thumb Dexterity Exercises

Hand movement tends to decrease as arthritis in the base of the thumb progresses. In late stages fine motor movement can become difficult. The following are some exercises which can help maintain your dexterity

- Use a small marble or a very small ball and with the tip of the exercised thumb move the ball with the thumb in a rotating mode. Start clockwise for 10 repetitions then anticlockwise
- Hold the marble or ball with tip of the exercised thumb, and move the thumb forward and backward in a straight line
- Use two marbles or two Chinese balls and try and start moving them in your hands by alternating/ rotating their position within your hand. Repeat this for about 5 minutes or until your thumb becomes uncomfortable

What to do next?

If your symptoms persist or get worse please contact the Hand and Wrist service to see a clinician on 0300 303 8063 . You do not need to go back to your GP at this stage.