

Orthopaedic Connection

Hand Pain From Arthritis

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Transforming patient information into patient understanding.

Hand pain can, of course, come from other causes than arthritis. Last week and this week, however, we are limiting our attention to arthritis as the cause of hand pain and disability.

Last week we concentrated on diagnosing the problem and treating it conservatively. Braces, which we did not cover, are available, but they are fairly restrictive and my patients don't like them. It is hard to do many things wearing a hand or wrist brace. Patients may wear one for awhile, but then it gets discarded. Bracing though is easy to try to see if it works. It can't do any harm.

Three common locations of arthritis

1. The small joints above the fingernails are called DIP joints (distal interphalangeal). As the joint(s) deteriorate small spurs form on the tops of the joints to make them appear lumpy. Medically they are called Heberden's nodes. They may be painful or not. They do limit motion in the joints and are sensitive when bumped. Anti-inflammatory medication can relieve symptoms. I have occasionally done surgery for these if they are too large or too painful.
2. The joints at the knuckle are known as MCP joints.

They are not affected by arthritis as often as the smaller joints in the hand or the joint where the thumb joins the wrist.

The most common arthritic condition affecting the MCP joints is Rheumatoid arthritis.

Rheumatoid arthritis is an unusual type of arthritis compared with osteoarthritis (wear and tear arthritis). The joints are destroyed by chemicals from the synovial lining.

Surgical treatment includes removal of the synovial lining in early cases or special joint replacements in cases where the joints have been destroyed.

3. Arthritis of the thumb.

This really deserves its own article(s) because although it is a little area it is a very common disabling kind of arthritis of the hand. Patients tell me they have a deep aching pain at the base of the thumb. Pain is worsened by activities involving pinch including jar opening, turning doorknobs or keys and writing.

Decreased hand strength and pain at night are common.

Arthritis occurs where the thumb metacarpal joins the wrist bones.

Treatment includes bracing, oral medication, injections and sometimes surgery if the condition is painful enough.

I really do need to spend much more time on this important type of hand arthritis. I think I will stop here and go on next week. Come back, please.

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Dr. Haverbush