

# Hand Arthritis

## Exercise Guide

American Arthritis Foundation • 2–3× Daily

### Quick Facts

- ✓ Gentle, low-impact
- ✓ 5–10 min per session
- ✓ No equipment needed
- ✓ See results in weeks

These gentle exercises can help **improve mobility and reduce stiffness** in hands affected by arthritis. The exercises on this guide are recommended by the American Arthritis Foundation and are safe for most patients with moderate-to-severe arthritis. Consistent daily practice maintains joint function and eases everyday activities.

## How Arthritis Affects Your Hands

Arthritis damages the **smooth cartilage** that cushions the bone ends inside each finger joint. As cartilage wears away, bones begin to rub together, causing **pain, swelling, and stiffness**. Over time, bone spurs (osteophytes) may also form, further limiting your range of motion. The exercises in this guide are specifically designed to slow this process and maintain as much mobility as possible.

### What is happening inside your joint?

- **Normal joint:** Smooth cartilage cushions bones; synovial fluid lubricates movement.
- **Arthritic joint:** Cartilage thins or disappears; bone-on-bone friction creates pain and inflammation.
- **With exercise:** Gentle movement stimulates synovial fluid production, nourishing remaining cartilage and reducing stiffness.

## Step 1 — Warm Up First (Always!)

Heat **relaxes stiff tissues** and improves blood flow to the joint, making exercises safer and more comfortable. Skipping the warm-up significantly increases the risk of pain and injury.

### Warm Water Soak

Submerge hands in warm (not hot) water

Temperature: 38–40°C (100–104°F)

**Duration: 5–10 minutes**

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R

### Heating Pad

Wrap hand in a moist heating pad

Setting: low to medium only

**Duration: 5–10 minutes**

## Pain Awareness Scale

A little warmth or mild aching is normal. **Stop immediately if pain reaches 5–6 or higher.** Exercising through sharp pain can make arthritis worse and damage tissues further.



— Stay in the green zone (1–4). Stop at orange or red —

## Recommended Exercises

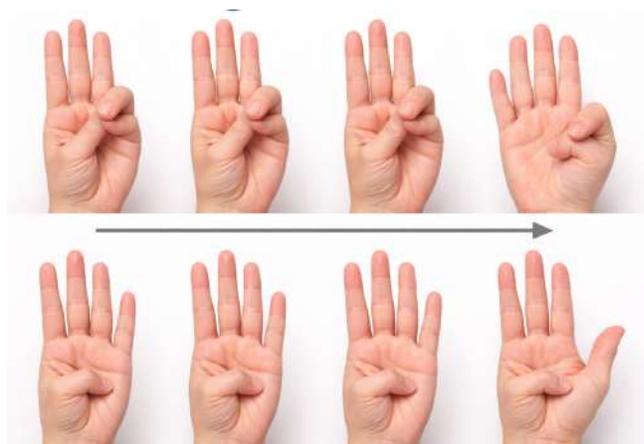
Complete all four exercises in sequence. Take a short rest between exercises if needed.

### 1. Finger Bends

Slowly bend each finger downward, curling it toward the center of your palm as far as comfortable, then gently straighten it back out to full extension. Work through each finger individually — index, middle, ring, and pinky — before repeating on the other hand.

**Reps / Frequency:** 3–5 reps per finger • Hold each bend 2–3 seconds • 2–3× daily

**Tip:** Move slowly and with control. Never force a finger to bend further than is comfortable.



## 2. Make an “O”

Touch the tip of your thumb to the tip of your index finger, forming a round “O” shape. Hold briefly, then release and move on to the middle finger, then the ring finger, then the pinky. This exercise maintains precision grip and fine motor function.

**Reps / Frequency:** 1 full sequence per hand • Repeat 3–5 times • 2–3× daily

**Tip:** *The circle doesn't need to be perfect. Focus on smooth, controlled movement rather than exact shape.*



## 3. Soft Ball Squeeze

Hold a soft foam ball or stress ball in your palm with all fingers wrapped around it. Gently squeeze the ball, hold for 3–5 seconds, then slowly release and open your hand fully. Use a ball that compresses easily with light pressure — never use a hard rubber ball.

**Reps / Frequency:** 10 squeezes per set • 2 sets • 2–3× daily

**Tip:** *Putty or a soft sponge works just as well as a store-bought stress ball. Keep the grip gentle, not forceful.*

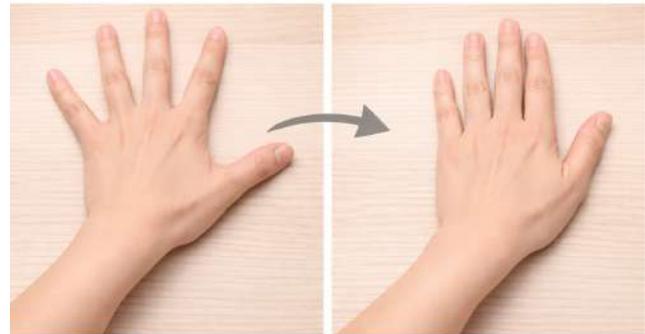


### 4. Finger Spread

Place your hand flat on a table, palm down. Gently fan all four fingers apart as wide as comfortable, hold the spread position for 3 seconds, then slowly bring all fingers back together. This stretches the tendons and ligaments on the sides of each finger.

**Reps / Frequency:** 5–10 reps • Hold spread 3 seconds • 2–3× daily

**Tip:** A flat table helps support the hand and prevents overextension. Work within your pain-free range.



### Benefits of Regular Practice

Consistent, daily practice of these exercises provides the following evidence-based benefits:

<p> <b>Strength</b> Maintain grip strength and hand muscle tone</p>	<p> <b>Mobility</b> Preserve range of motion and joint flexibility</p>	<p> <b>Daily Life</b> Improve ability to dress, cook, and write with ease</p>
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## Important Guidelines

Follow these guidelines every session for safe, effective results:

	<b>Warm Up First</b>	Soak hands in warm water or use a heating pad for 5–10 minutes before every session.
	<b>Go Slowly</b>	Move with full control. Rushing significantly increases the risk of strain or injury.
	<b>Respect Pain</b>	Mild warmth or aching is normal. Sharp or severe pain (>5 on scale) = stop immediately.
	<b>Consult Your Doctor</b>	Talk with your physician before starting any new exercise program.
	<b>Be Consistent</b>	Daily gentle effort produces far better results than occasional intense sessions.
	<b>Rest Between Sessions</b>	Allow at least 3–4 hours between sessions. Do not exercise more than 3 times per day.

## Questions? Need More Information?

Feel free to reach out for additional guidance and support.

**American Arthritis Foundation**