



Advice on protecting your joints

Information for patients from the Hand Therapy Service

You have been given this leaflet by your therapist as you are experiencing joint pain. They feel that the following advice may help you protect your joints in the future, as well as manage your current symptoms.

What is the aim of joint protection?

- To provide you with a plan to help manage your pain and carry out your daily activities (such as housework, gardening, or making a cup of tea) more easily.
- To protect your joints and soft tissues (muscles and tendons).
- To keep your joints moving.
- To keep your muscle strength.
- To help reduce your pain.
- To reduce fatigue (tiredness).
- To help you have more energy.

How can joint protection help?

There is national evidence that joint protection can significantly improve pain, stiffness, and flare-ups without you having to stop certain activities. This is done by changing everyday tasks and making them easier to carry out, by reducing the forces and stresses through your joints during the activity, which will maintain your joints for longer.

It's not what you do; it's the way that you do it that makes the difference



What is joint protection?

Joint protection includes:

- evaluating your daily activities to find out whether the way in which you use your joints is adding to the pain you are feeling and any deformities that have developed; and then
- changing the way you carry out those tasks using tools/devices that can help to reduce load and effort, in turn reducing your pain.

It does not mean that you should stop using your joints, just that you should use them differently.

To start with, these new techniques may feel as though activities take longer but the more you do them the more they will become part of your daily routine.

Tips and advice for protecting your joints

The following advice aims to help you look after your joints and protect against or reduce strain put on your individual joints, such as the small joints in your hand.

1. Avoid staying in one position for too long

Break activities such as writing and typing down in to smaller blocks of time. For example do not spend hours typing without a break, make sure you have a rest before your joints become painful (the time may be different for each person).



- When reading, try to hold the page open with the palm of your hand, resting the spine of the book against your opposite palm, change hands regularly before you start to experience pain (see images above).
- Take regular breaks to rest your joints. This is individual to you but the aim is to take breaks before you feel pain to prevent it from happening, but if you are unable to do this take a break as soon as you feel pain.
- Cut down the amount of time you spend doing a particular task, is there any way you can change the activity so that it is more efficient.

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2. Reduce the force and effort needed to perform activities by changing working methods, using assistive devices, and reducing the weight of objects

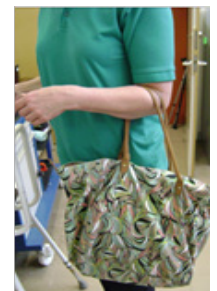
- Carry items using your palms and forearms (see below).
- Use two hands to lift heavy items instead of one; this immediately spreads the weight over both arms.
- Halve the load you are carrying, or find lightweight alternatives for the job.
- Use two hands to lift a full kettle (see image), using a tea towel against the hot surface of the kettle.



- Use each joint in its most stable anatomic and/or functional position.
- Avoid positions of deformity and forces in their direction by becoming aware of how you use your hands, for example avoiding lateral pinch also known as a “key grip” and twisting positions.
- Avoid staying in one position for too long.

3. Use the strongest, largest joints available for the job

- Use the larger muscles of your body which are better able to handle the strain. For example, hug large objects close to your body to carry them or carry them over your forearm (see images).



4. Respect your pain

- Pain is a signal to change or stop doing an activity.
- Listen to your body; it will tell you when you are doing too much, so stop and break up the activity into smaller time blocks.
- Stop before pain begins or the pain will stop you!

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5. Avoid gripping objects too tightly

Holding and using small items or tools (such as pens or cutlery) puts lots of force through your thumb and fingers. To reduce this force, use larger grips. For example, writing can cause increased forces on your thumb, index, and middle fingers which can be reduced by using a pen with ink that flows well (fountain or gel pens), by using larger widths, or by using a pen adaptation (see image) (pens with a rubber grip are less likely to slip so you do not have to grip so tightly).



Try to widen or enlarge grips in general - for example use pipe lagging on cutlery (see image) as the more surface area of the hand the grip touches, the better distributed are the forces.

There are lots of specially designed items available such as garden tools – please ask your therapist for further information.



6. Balance work and rest

- Rest is an important part of your treatment if your joints are inflamed, swollen, or painful. Balancing activity and rest will help.
- Spread difficult or challenging activities out through the day. This might mean preparing the vegetables for your evening meal earlier in the day or spreading more tiring tasks out over a longer period of time. Take turns between doing light and heavy tasks.
- Try to get a good night's sleep; routine is important to train your brain to relax and unwind from the day's activity. Try...
 - hot milky drinks (with no caffeine)
 - a warm bath/shower/heat packs (or cold treatment for inflammation)
 - massage
 - listening to relaxing music
 - reading/audio book
 - meditation/relaxation techniques
 - do things you know make you feel relaxed
 - try doing the same combination of things if you are having a period of poor sleep.
- Try not to drink caffeine or watch TV close to bed time as these act as stimulants to the brain, and can stop you getting a good night's sleep.

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7. Pacing and energy saving

- Rest before you get too tired
- Balance heavier tasks with lighter tasks
- Break down large tasks into smaller chunks
- Start harder jobs after you have had enough time to rest
- Respect your pain...it is telling you to stop and rest
- Save energy for activities which are important to you
- Try to sit for activities which take longer than 10 minutes
- Try to avoid sitting or standing still for long periods of time (more than 20 minutes)
- Make jobs simpler
- Avoid repetitive tasks such as going up and down stairs
- Organise your environment - for example gather all equipment needed for a task before starting, or reorganise kitchen cupboards so that items that you most often use are easily reached
- Use assistive devices (such as pen grips).

8. Maintain strength and range of motion

The exercises given to you by your therapist must be completed to both help prevent joint stiffness and help strengthen your joints.

9. "Shift don't lift"

Humans are creatures of habit but there are always activities in your daily life that can be reduced, changed, or cut out completely. For example, when making a cup of tea think of where your cup, saucer, tea bag, sugar, teaspoon, kettle, and milk are in your kitchen. How close are they to each other? Can you keep them on the work top? Can you slide the kettle along to the sink rather than lifting it?

Further questions

If after reading this leaflet you have any further questions please contact your GP.

If you would like this information in **another language, audio, Braille, Easy Read, or large print** please ask a member of staff. You can ask someone to contact us on your behalf.

Any complaints, comments, concerns, or compliments please speak to your doctor or nurse, or contact the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) on 01227 78 31 45, or email ekh-tr.pals@nhs.net

Patients should not bring in large sums of money or valuables into hospital. Please note that East Kent Hospitals accepts no responsibility for the loss or damage to personal property, unless the property had been handed in to Trust staff for safe-keeping.

Further patient leaflets are available via the East Kent Hospitals web site www.ekhuft.nhs.uk/patientinformation