

Handy, helpful ways to keep your hands healthy

By Anna Hrushka

We use our hands countless times a day. From typing and brushing our teeth to throwing a football, our hands allow us to perform daily tasks as well as enjoy our favorite recreational activities.

Our ability to perform tasks with our hands make them a valuable asset that should be protected.

In fact, we use our hands for so much that any loss of mobility can affect our physical and mental health.

If your hands are injured or in pain, “it takes a toll on your psyche,” says Jane Fedorczyk, PhD, PT, CHT, a professor of physical therapy and occupational therapy and director of the Center of Hand and Upper Limb Health and Performance at Thomas Jefferson University.

It's important that people make adjustments to their routines to make sure their hands aren't

strained or overworked, Fedorczyk says.

A common hand health problem for people who engage in daily repetitive hand motion is carpal tunnel syndrome. The condition happens when one of the major nerves in the hand is compressed or squeezed. It can cause pain, numbness and tingling in the hand and arm.

Certain factors can put some people more at risk for developing carpal tunnel syndrome.

Smokers, people who are prediabetic or diabetic and those who don't take part in regular aerobic activity are more likely to develop the disability.

Women are also three times more likely than men to develop carpal tunnel syndrome, according to the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke. That may be due to women having smaller carpal tunnels than men.

To prevent carpal tunnel syndrome, NINDS recommends stretching exercises and rest breaks. Your work area should also enable your wrist to maintain a natural position. Rotating jobs among workers and wearing fingerless gloves to keep hands flexible and warm can also help.

“We know that extreme temperatures contribute (to carpal tunnel syndrome) in addition to forceful, repetitive gripping,” says Fedorczyk.

Fedorczyk says that people should stay active throughout their day. She recommends taking frequent breaks that include arm stretches, backward shoulder rolls and neck circles to break up long periods of sustained posture.

“If you don't get up and move, it doesn't matter how perfect your workstation is,” she says. “You weren't meant to sit still all day long.”

Breaks can also help with other hand health problems, such as cramps from writing or typing, or tendinitis or bursitis, which are types



>> For more information on hand health, visit www.ninds.nih.gov

of inflammation. Your doctor or health care provider can help identify what's causing pain in your hands and recommend treatment or exercises that can help.

Another threat to hand health is arthritis. Arthritis is the leading cause of disability in America, affecting more than 50 million adults and 300,000 children, according to the Arthritis Foundation.

The condition causes joint pain, swelling and stiffness and decreases mobility. Regular physical activity, as well as maintaining a healthy weight, can help reduce the risk of developing arthritis.

For people who have arthritis, Fedorczyk says it's important they follow the four “Ps” when performing tasks with their hands. First up are positioning and protection.

“Avoid extreme positions,” Fedorczyk says. “With your hands, you would avoid putting your fingers, thumb or your wrist in maximum flexion or extension. You should avoid extreme ends of the range of motion for that joint.”

Planning and pacing are also important to hand health.

“If you're having a good day and you feel good after nine holes of golf, don't push your luck and play 18,” Fedorczyk says.

When doing hand-heavy activities like gardening or sewing, set a time limit and stick to it.



Staying healthy with clean hands

A key part of hand health is hygiene. Keeping your hands clean helps prevent disease from spreading to yourself and others.

Most people wash their hands before and after eating and after using the restroom. But touching things like animals and garbage are some other common tasks that require a thorough cleanse, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says.

Follow five simple steps when washing your hands:

- ◆ Wet your hands with water.
- ◆ Lather by rubbing your hands together with soap, making sure to include the back of your hands, in between your fingers and underneath your finger nails.
- ◆ Scrub your hands for at least 20 seconds. That's long enough to hum the “Happy Birthday” song twice through.
- ◆ Rinse your hands under clean water.
- ◆ Dry them with a clean towel or allow them to air dry.

If you don't have access to soap and water, use hand sanitizer.

