Occupational therapy and arthritis

This booklet provides information and answers to your questions about this therapy.

Arthritis Research UK produce and print our booklets entirely from charitable donations.
What is occupational therapy?

Occupational therapy can play a very important part in helping you to manage your arthritis. It’ll help you find ways of continuing with your work, household tasks, personal care and hobbies independently and without straining your joints.

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What is occupational therapy?

Occupational therapy aims to help people who have difficulty with their everyday work, home or leisure activities because of illness or disability. Some occupational therapists (OTs) have specialist knowledge in dealing with difficulties caused by arthritis and related conditions, and they’ll work with you to find solutions to these difficulties, so you can manage your daily activities independently.

Occupational therapy can help you to manage your arthritis in a number of ways. Occupational therapists can offer you:

- advice on using your joints without straining them (joint protection)
- splints to support your joints while working or resting
- recommendations on gadgets and equipment to help you with tasks at home and work
- exercises to improve hand and wrist movements and grip
- advice on planning and balancing daily activities with rest to reduce tiredness (fatigue)
- help and advice on driving and mobility problems
- relaxation techniques.
- help and advice on coping physically and emotionally with the changes your condition may have on your life.

Occupational therapists may work within the NHS, Social Services departments, some charities or in private practice.

Your GP, consultant or specialist nurse can refer you to an occupational therapist, or you can refer yourself if you feel it would be helpful. In some cases, you may be referred to a specialist hand therapist who’ll be able to offer similar help and advice.

If you’re having trouble managing at home, you can ask Social Services to put you in touch with an occupational therapist. They may come and see you in your own home to assess whether you need special equipment to help you.

How does occupational therapy help?

At your first appointment, the occupational therapist will assess your condition, including which joints are affected and where you have pain. They’ll ask about any problems you may be having with everyday tasks.
It’ll help if you think about these before your appointment. This might include difficulties with:

• washing and dressing
• household tasks and cooking, including difficulty using appliances
• getting around, both inside your home and outside
• driving
• work activities
• leisure and social activities
• childcare and looking after others
• sleep
• using your hands.

The occupational therapist will work with you to identify problems and explore possible solutions. This may include:

• practical advice on overcoming everyday difficulties
• suggesting different ways to help you do things more easily
• advice on managing work and your leisure activities
• discussing your condition and helping you to help yourself
• providing advice on your condition either one to one or offering education/information groups

• advice about managing mood and stress
• providing splints or arthritis gloves to rest or support your joints and help reduce your pain
• suggesting hand exercises to help improve movement and grip
• referral to other agencies, for example physiotherapy or Social Services.
Overcoming everyday difficulties

Your arthritis can affect you in many different ways, but an occupational therapist can help you with some of the difficulties you face.

Making everyday activities easier

The occupational therapist can help you to analyse your work, household and leisure activities, find out where there are problems and suggest changes that might help. You may need to rethink the way you do things, such as using your hands differently, positioning yourself more comfortably, taking more rest breaks or, if need be, getting help with some heavier jobs. For example, if you have problems with ironing because it’s uncomfortable to stand for too long or to hold the iron, then the solution may be to sit or perch on a stool, to wear a supportive wrist splint and/or to use a lightweight iron.

See Arthritis Research UK booklets Work and arthritis; Work-related joint disorders.

Gadgets and equipment

The occupational therapist can advise on the best gadgets to make tasks easier at home or at work, which you can buy in high-street shops or online, and how to choose easy-to-use (ergonomic) products. There’s a huge range of gadgets – from chunky-grip pens to vegetable peelers. If need be, the therapist can help you get special equipment to help you manage everyday tasks and get about, such as kettle-tippers, bath seats, raised toilet seats and stairlifts. You can get these either through a local retailer or from a community equipment store. The occupational therapist can advise on what you need and how and where to get them. Social Services’ occupational therapists are experts in home adaptations such as ramps, level-access showers and stairlifts.

For more information on gadgets, equipment and home adaptations, see Arthritis Research UK booklet Everyday living and arthritis.

Getting around

If you have difficulties getting around, your occupational therapist can suggest vehicle adaptations to help you, such as a panoramic-view mirror if turning your head is difficult. Or they can help you decide on the best choices for your next car, such as an automatic car with power steering, and getting help from agencies.
such as Motability. For more complex problems they may recommend an assessment at a specialist mobility centre. They may also be able to advise you about wheelchairs and scooters.

Helping you to help yourself

Whichever type of arthritis you have, it’s important to start looking after your joints as soon as possible. The occupational therapist will show you how to reduce the strain on your joints. This is known as joint protection.

Joint protection doesn’t mean you should stop using your joints, just that you should use them in the best way to protect them and keep them mobile, which might be differently to your usual way – for example, by:

• spreading the load over several joints (see Figure 1)
• allowing larger, stronger joints to take more of the strain (see Figure 2)
• making sure you’re not twisting or straining your joints when using them.

⚠️ The methods mentioned here are explained in more detail in our booklet *Looking after your joints when you have arthritis*. They can be applied to household, leisure or work activities.

Your OT can offer advice on balancing your daily activities, which helps reduce fatigue.
**Figure 1**
Spread the load over several joints.

WRONG ✗
Instead of using one hand...

RIGHT ✓
...try using two hands to spread the load.

**Figure 2**
Use larger, stronger joints to take more of the strain.

WRONG ✗
Instead of carrying papers in one hand...

RIGHT ✓
...try using both.
Your occupational therapist can also advise on how to manage the fatigue that’s often associated with arthritis, for example by balancing activities with rest, planning ahead and prioritising your tasks. Relaxation techniques can help to reduce the effects of stress and fatigue and can help with pain control.

Providing splints to rest or support your joints

Wearing splints such as a wrist or thumb splint can help to rest and support joints that are painful or unstable. The occupational or hand therapist may custom-make one for you or provide a ready-made one.
Different types of splints are available to support your joints while you’re working (see Figure 3) and to keep your joints in a stable position while you’re resting (see Figure 4). Or they may recommend arthritis gloves – these are made from a flexible but supportive fabric but leave your fingertips free for fine movements and grip. Corrective splints may also be used in some cases to improve the positioning of your joints.

![See Arthritis Research UK booklet](http://www.arthritisresearchuk.org)

**Splints for arthritis of the wrist and hand.**

**Where can I find out more?**

If you’ve found this information useful you might be interested in these other titles from our range:

**Conditions**
- Osteoarthritis
- Rheumatoid arthritis
- Fibromyalgia

**Self-help and daily living**
- Everyday living and arthritis.
- Fatigue and arthritis
- Gardening and arthritis
- Keep moving
- Looking after your joints when you have arthritis
- Pain and arthritis
- Sleep and arthritis
- Splints for arthritis of the wrist and hand
- Work and arthritis
- Work-related joint disorders

You can download all of our booklets and leaflets from our website or order them by contacting:

**Arthritis Research UK**
Copeman House
St Mary’s Court
St Mary’s Gate
Chesterfield
Derbyshire S41 7TD
Phone: 0300 790 0400
www.arthritisresearchuk.org
**Related organisations**
The following organisations may be able to provide additional advice and information:

**Arthritis Care**  
Floor 4, Linen Court  
10 East Road  
London N1 6AD  
Phone: 020 7380 6500  
Helpline: 0808 800 4050  
Email: info@arthritiscare.org.uk  
www.arthritiscare.org.uk

**Assist UK**  
Redbank House  
4 St Chad’s Street  
Manchester M8 8QA  
Phone: 0161 832 9757  
Helpline: 0161 850 9757  
Email: general.info@assist-uk.org  
www.assist-uk.org

**College of Occupational Therapists**  
106–114 Borough High Street  
Southwark  
London SE1 1LB  
Phone: 020 7357 6480  
www.cot.org.uk

**Disabled Living Foundation**  
Ground Floor, Landmark House  
Hammersmith Bridge Road  
London W6 9EJ  
Helpline: 0300 999 0004  
Email: helpline@dlf.org.uk  
www.dlf.org.uk  
http://asksara.dlf.org.uk/  
(self-help for everyday problems)

**Disability Rights UK**  
Ground Floor, CAN Mezzanine  
49–51 East Road  
London N1 6AH  
Phone: 020 7250 8181  
Email: enquiries@disabilityrightsuk.org  
http://disabilityrightsuk.org

**Forum of Mobility Centres**  
c/o Providence Chapel  
Warehorne, Ashford  
Kent TN26 2JX  
Phone: 0800 559 3636  
Email: mobility@rcht.cornwall.nhs.uk  
www.mobility-centres.org.uk

**Motability**  
Motability Operations  
City Gate House  
22 Southwark Bridge Road  
London SE1 9HB  
Phone: 0300 456 4566  
www.motability.co.uk

**National Rheumatoid Arthritis Society (NRAS)**  
Ground Floor, 4 The Switchback  
Gardner Road  
Maidenhead  
Berkshire SL6 7RJ  
Phone: 0845 458 3969 or 01628 823524  
Helpline: 0800 298 7650  
Email: helpline@nras.org.uk  
www.nras.org.uk
Notes
We’re here to help

Arthritis Research UK is the charity leading the fight against arthritis.
We’re the UK’s fourth largest medical research charity and fund scientific and medical research into all types of arthritis and musculoskeletal conditions.
We’re working to take the pain away for sufferers with all forms of arthritis and helping people to remain active. We’ll do this by funding high-quality research, providing information and campaigning.
Everything we do is underpinned by research.
We publish over 60 information booklets which help people affected by arthritis to understand more about the condition, its treatment, therapies and how to help themselves.
We also produce a range of separate leaflets on many of the drugs used for arthritis and related conditions. We recommend that you read the relevant leaflet for more detailed information about your medication.
Please also let us know if you’d like to receive our quarterly magazine, Arthritis Today, which keeps you up to date with current research and education news, highlighting key projects that we’re funding and giving insight into the latest treatment and self-help available.
We often feature case studies and have regular columns for questions and answers, as well as readers’ hints and tips for managing arthritis.

Tell us what you think
Please send your views to: feedback@arthritisresearchuk.org or write to us at: Arthritis Research UK, Copeman House, St Mary’s Court, St Mary’s Gate, Chesterfield, Derbyshire S41 7TD

A team of people contributed to this booklet. The original text was written by Alison Hammond and Paula Jeffreson, who have expertise in the subject. It was assessed at draft stage by occupational therapists Kirsty Bancroft, Julie Weeks, Kate Hackett and Louise Hollister. An Arthritis Research UK editor revised the text to make it easy to read and a non-medical panel, including interested societies, checked it for understanding. An Arthritis Research UK medical advisor, Dr Angela Jacklin, is responsible for the content overall.
Get involved

You can help to take the pain away from millions of people in the UK by:

- volunteering
- supporting our campaigns
- taking part in a fundraising event
- making a donation
- asking your company to support us
- buying products from our online and high-street shops.

To get more actively involved, please call us on 0300 790 0400, email us at enquiries@arthritisresearchuk.org or go to www.arthritisresearchuk.org