

# Osteoarthritis of the Thumb



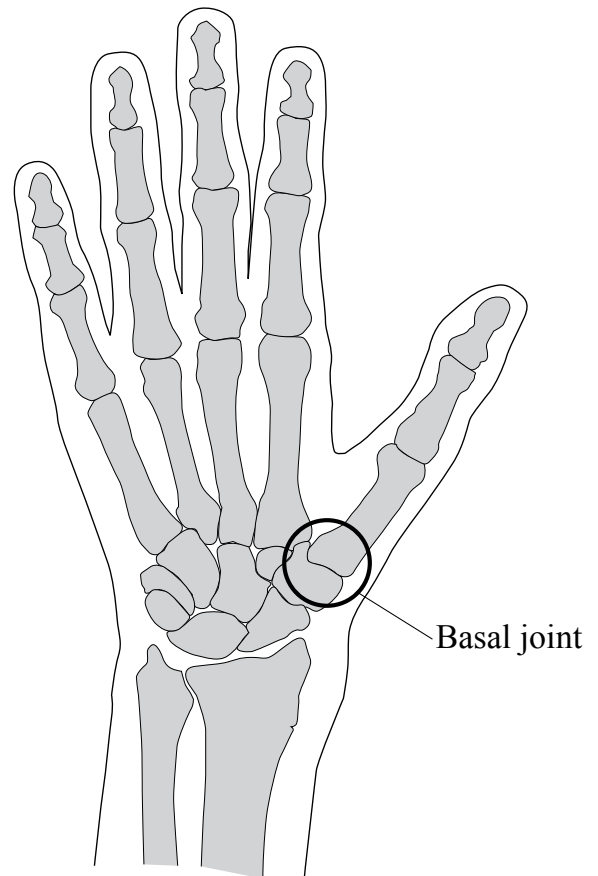
THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY  
WEXNER MEDICAL CENTER

Osteoarthritis is a joint disease that affects cartilage. It is the most common type of arthritis. This disease in the hand often affects the joint at the base of the thumb, called the basal joint.

Cartilage is the tissue that covers the ends of the bones and allows them to move easily. Cartilage also acts as a shock absorber. In osteoarthritis, the cartilage wears out in the joints over time from use or after an injury. The bones rub together causing pain, swelling, and loss of motion of the joint.

The basal joint of the thumb allows the thumb to move up and down, pinch, and move across the palm. It is formed where the bone of the thumb, called a metacarpal, meets the small bone of the wrist, called the trapezium.

Arthritis in this joint is most often seen in women over the age of 40. It happens more often in those who have had injuries to these bones in the past and those who have loose joints.



## Signs

Signs of osteoarthritis in the thumb may include:

- Aching or soreness at the base of the thumb that gets worse with movements, such as turning a door knob or writing.
- Stiffness
- Swelling
- A bump may develop at the base of the thumb
- Loss of motion and weakness
- Over time, pain may occur at night and during rest

Your doctor will check your thumb and ask about your signs. X-rays of your thumb may be done to check for joint damage.

## Treatment

Your treatment plan will include ways to manage pain and improve function. This may include:

- **Exercise** to improve use of the hand or fingers and keep the joints moving.
- **Rest and joint care** to prevent pain. A thumb spica splint can help protect joints and take pressure off of them. The splint may be worn during sleep or with certain activities. Your doctor or hand therapist can help you get fitted for a splint and show you how to use it.
- **Pain relief** using different methods. Warm towels, warm baths, paraffin baths, and hot packs applied to the joints can relieve pain and stiffness. Cold packs can relieve pain or numb the area. Talk to your doctor, physical therapist, or occupational therapist to find the best method of pain relief for you. Your doctor can recommend medicine to relieve pain and improve function. Corticosteroid injections can provide pain relief that lasts for months.
- **Surgery** to relieve pain and improve function. You and your doctor will decide whether surgery is right for you and what type of surgery may be best. After surgery and rehabilitation, patients often have less pain and swelling and more function.

## Living with osteoarthritis

Educate yourself about the disease and take part in your care:

- Learn about the disease.
- Work with your doctor to manage pain.
- Learn how to cope with arthritis to stay active.
- Know that you are not alone. Support groups can help.

For information and programs to help you manage your osteoarthritis, visit these websites:

- The Arthritis Foundation at [www.arthritis.org](http://www.arthritis.org)
- The National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases within the National Institutes of Health at [www.niams.nih.gov](http://www.niams.nih.gov)

You might also want to check your library for self-help books and brochures or magazines, like [Arthritis Today](#).

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**Talk to your doctor or health care team if you have any questions about your care.**

For more health information, contact the Library for Health Information at **614-293-3707** or e-mail **[health-info@osu.edu](mailto:health-info@osu.edu)**.