SYMPTOM

Hand pain

Hand pain is discomfort in the fingers, thumb, palm, knuckles, or back of the hand.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
Aching, burning, stiffness, or sharp pain with movement

WHERE IT IS FELT
Fingers, thumb, palm, knuckles, or back of the hand

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Minor injuries, overuse, osteoarthritis

WHEN IT IS URGENT
New numbness, deformity, or a hot, rapidly swelling hand

USUALLY LASTS
Days after minor strain; longer with joint or nerve conditions

SEE A DOCTOR IF
Pain persists two weeks, recurs, or limits normal hand use

Overview

Hand pain can affect one small area or most of the hand. It may begin suddenly after an injury or develop gradually with repeated use. The pain may come from joints, bones, muscles, tendons, nerves, skin, or blood vessels.

The location and pattern of your symptoms can offer clues, but hand pain does not point to one diagnosis. Pain with swelling after a fall has different possible causes from tingling that wakes you at night.

Problems in the wrist, elbow, shoulder, or neck can sometimes cause pain or altered sensation in the hand. Symptoms may also be related to a condition affecting several joints or other parts of the body.

What it may feel or look like

Hand pain may be dull, sharp, burning, throbbing, or tender to touch. It may be constant or appear only when you grip, pinch, type, lift, or bend a finger.

Other symptoms can include:

Notice when the pain began and whether a particular movement brings it on. Also note any recent fall, cut, bite, new activity, or change in work or exercise.

- Swelling, bruising, warmth, or redness
- Stiffness or reduced movement
- Tingling, numbness, or an electric-shock feeling
- Weak grip or frequently dropping objects
- Clicking, catching, or locking of a finger
- A lump near a joint or tendon
- Changes in finger colour or temperature

Common causes

Common causes include minor sprains, bruises, and irritation from repeated gripping or hand movements. Tendons, which connect muscles to bones, can become irritated around the thumb, fingers, or wrist.

Osteoarthritis is wear-related change in a joint. It can cause pain, stiffness, swelling, and bony bumps, often around the thumb base or finger joints.

Carpal tunnel syndrome happens when a nerve is compressed at the wrist. It commonly causes tingling, numbness, or burning in the thumb and nearby fingers, sometimes with hand weakness. A finger that catches or locks may be due to an irritated tendon, often called trigger finger.

Less common causes include inflammatory arthritis, in which the immune system causes joint inflammation. Gout can cause a sudden, very painful, swollen joint. A fluid-filled lump called a ganglion cyst may also cause discomfort or limit movement.

Nerve irritation in the neck, elbow, or wrist can send pain, tingling, or numbness into the hand. Poor blood flow may cause fingers to become painful, cold, pale, or blue. Skin conditions and painful nail infections can also affect the hand.

Causes needing prompt assessment include a broken or dislocated bone, a deep cut, a tendon injury, or an infection. Infection is more likely when pain comes with spreading redness, warmth, pus, fever, or rapidly increasing swelling. Human and animal bites can cause deeper injury even when the skin opening looks small.

When to seek medical care

Call emergency services or go to an emergency department if:

Seek urgent same-day care after a significant injury if the hand looks bent or misshapen, swelling is severe, or you cannot use it normally. You should also get same-day advice for a deep cut, puncture, human or animal bite, or a wound containing dirt or another object.

A hot, red, rapidly swelling hand or finger needs prompt assessment, particularly if you have a fever, feel unwell, or have difficulty bending or straightening a finger.

Book a routine appointment if pain is worsening, keeps returning, affects sleep or normal activities, or has not improved after about two weeks of self-care. Arrange an earlier review if numbness, weakness, persistent swelling, or morning stiffness develops.

- A finger or part of the hand has been cut off
- Bleeding is heavy or does not stop with firm pressure
- The hand becomes cold, pale, or blue
- You suddenly cannot move or feel the hand, especially after injury
- Hand or arm discomfort occurs with chest pressure, breathlessness, sweating, or nausea

How the cause is found

A healthcare professional will ask where the pain is, how it started, and which movements affect it. They may ask about work, hobbies, previous injuries, other painful joints, and conditions such as diabetes or arthritis.

During an examination, they may compare both hands and check movement, grip, sensation, blood flow, swelling, and tender areas. Specific movements can help identify whether a joint, tendon, or nerve may be involved.

Tests are not always needed. An X-ray can show many fractures and some joint changes. Ultrasound or MRI may be used for certain tendon, ligament, soft-tissue, or hidden bone injuries. Nerve tests can assess suspected nerve compression. Blood tests or a sample of joint fluid may be needed when infection, gout, or inflammatory arthritis is possible.

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on the cause and may include temporary activity changes, a splint, hand therapy, medicines, an injection, or surgery. Many minor injuries improve without a procedure.

For mild pain without a serious injury:

Follow the medicine label. A pharmacist can advise if you take other medicines or have stomach, kidney, liver, heart, bleeding, or pregnancy-related concerns.

Avoid forceful stretching or repeatedly testing an injured hand. Do not keep a splint on longer than advised, since unnecessary immobilisation can increase stiffness. Cuts should be rinsed and covered with a clean dressing, but deep wounds and bites need professional assessment.

- Rest from movements that clearly worsen the pain
- Keep the hand gently moving within a comfortable range
- Use a wrapped cold pack for recent pain or swelling
- Remove rings promptly if the fingers begin to swell
- Consider paracetamol or an anti-inflammatory medicine if safe for you

What to expect

A mild bruise, strain, or overuse problem may begin improving within days, although full recovery can take longer. More significant injuries may need several weeks and guided rehabilitation.

Arthritis and some nerve or tendon conditions can cause symptoms that come and go. Treatment often focuses on improving hand use, reducing pain, and preventing further irritation. Persistent weakness, numbness, locking, or loss of movement should be reassessed rather than simply worked through.

If you are given exercises or a splint, follow the plan provided and attend follow-up if progress stalls. Return sooner if swelling, redness, sensation, strength, or hand colour worsens.

Common questions

Can I keep using a painful hand?

Gentle everyday movement is often reasonable if it does not increase pain or swelling. Pause heavy gripping, lifting, or repetitive work that clearly makes symptoms worse. After a major injury, avoid using the hand until it has been assessed.

Does numbness matter?

Yes. Numbness or tingling can suggest pressure on a nerve, although there are several possible causes. Arrange an appointment if it persists, wakes you at night, or comes with

weakness. Sudden loss of feeling after an injury needs urgent care.

Can hand pain come from my neck?

Yes. A nerve irritated in the neck can cause pain, tingling, numbness, or weakness farther down the arm and into the hand. Neck pain may be present, but it is not always noticeable.

Does a swollen joint always mean arthritis?

No. Swelling may follow an injury or result from tendon irritation, infection, gout, or another joint condition. Rapid swelling, heat, marked redness, or fever needs prompt assessment.

Sources

- NHS. Hand pain
- MedlinePlus, U.S. National Library of Medicine. Hand Injuries and Disorders
- American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons. Arthritis of the Hand
- American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons. Carpal Tunnel Syndrome
- NHS. Broken arm or wrist