

Joint Protection Principles

Joint protection is a set of principles, designed to assist people who have inflammation of their joints. It involves making small changes to the way you do everyday activities, in order to protect your joints from daily wear and tear, preserve the function you have, and hopefully reduce pain and inflammation.

Main Aims

- Reducing pain.
- Reducing inflammation.
- Reducing strain and damage to the joint/s.
- Conserving energy.
- Reducing the risk of joint deformities developing.

Main Principles

Spread the Load, Reduce the strain

- Spread the load over larger, stronger joints rather than relying on smaller joints. For example, open a heavy door with your shoulder and elbow rather than putting all the load through your fingers; use both hands to lift a plate / cup rather than one hand.
- Avoid gripping small / thin objects for sustained periods of time. For example, using a knife or a pen can put significant stress through the small joints of your hand, so limit this type of activity or only do for short periods.
- You can buy large handled pens and cutlery from various equipment companies in shops or online, these help to reduce the strain on the joints in your hands.

Rest and Energy Conservation

- Try to balance rest and activity, for example, try not to do all the housework or heavy physical jobs in one day. Spread out these activities and make sure you have rest periods in between. This can enable you to conserve your energy for more enjoyable activities, and prevent you from becoming overly tired. It also gives your joints a chance to rest and recover, reducing the possibility of inflammation caused by doing too much.
- Organise and plan your week ahead so that you can spread out domestic tasks and social events.
- Re-arrange items in the kitchen to be in easy reach and accessible.
- Get help with housework, shopping or gardening if you feel you are unable to manage or that doing these tasks is having a detrimental effect on your joints.

Pain

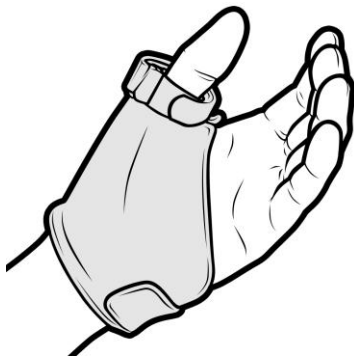
- It is important to take notice if your joints are painful or in a “flare up”. If this is the case, you will need to be extra careful with the activities you do, and try to rest the affected joints until the inflammation reduces.
- Pain at the end of the day can often mean you have done too much, and this can have a knock on effect for the next few days (see above).
- If an activity is painful, see if you can adapt the way you do it to reduce the strain on your joints, which may be the cause the pain.
- An activity which is putting a strain on your joints will not necessarily be painful. This does not mean your joints are protected though. If it looks and feels like it is strenuous to your joints, it probably is!

Positioning & Posture

- Try to do activities in a good posture. This will involve keeping your back straight, shoulders back and down, and items within easy reach. For example, you might find it more comfortable (and energy saving), to do ironing in a perched or seated position, or when preparing food you could sit at a table.
- Avoid stooping, over reaching or bending at awkward angles because if your posture is poor, the rest of your body is out of alignment and is vulnerable to joint damage.
- Change positions regularly during activities.
- If you work at a computer, you can ask your employer to arrange for the workstation to be assessed, to ensure it encourages a good posture.

Avoid Positions of Deformity

- This means that if your joints (particularly in your hands) are starting to sit in an unusual position, try to avoid this position and encourage a more normal position. If joints are left in these positions of deformity for long periods they can become very stiff and difficult to correct.
- Some ‘off the shelf splints’ can help to support your joints, for example a thumb spica. They can be bought in some chemists or online.



- Hand Therapists can sometimes provide rigid thermoplastic splints to encourage a more normal position in the hands. Speak to your MSK therapist about whether this would be appropriate for you.
- Try not to do activities that encourage the position of deformity.

Adapting

- You may be finding simple tasks such as opening jars or turning keys are becoming difficult or causing pain. There are lots of gadgets on the market designed to make these jobs easier so have a look around an 'Independent Living' shop, look online or order a catalogue from one of the many mail order companies that sell equipment for people with disabilities.
- If you are finding getting up from the chair, toilet, bed, getting up the stairs or out of the bath difficult, you may benefit from an assessment from an Occupational Therapist (OT) at your home. You can refer yourself to the adult community Occupational Therapist's at the Council.

Final Comments

It is difficult to change habits of a lifetime, and you will probably be used to doing daily activities without thinking about them first. The above principles require a change of habit, which involves thinking through how and when you will do the activity before you begin. This can be difficult at first. However, it becomes much easier as time goes on, and you should feel the benefits from these changes, which will encourage you further.