

# Helping Hands

**Laura Butler, OT/R**  
**Occupational Therapist**  
**St. Francis Physical Therapy**

It's that time of year again, when arthritis sufferers literally feel the bone-chilling effects of a Minnesota winter. We use our hands in practically everything we do, so when arthritis strikes our digits it is almost impossible to get through the winter without cold, stiff, achy hands. To ease those hurting hands, read on about the "helping hands" suggestions and you just might find the upcoming season more bearable.

The key to avoiding hand pain from arthritis is to think of your hands as "helping hands". They will only help with your manual work, not take the full load. Hard gripping, twisting, torquing, and sustained positions all contribute to joint pain. Your hands are going to assist your arms and body into getting the work done.

- a.. Always use the largest joint possible (elbow or shoulder)
- b.. Take full advantage of electrical appliances/tools
- c.. Push objects whenever possible, avoid lifting
- d.. Avoid twisting and awkward positions of the hand

Here are some more specific examples. Instead of carrying your purse in your hand, drape it over your shoulder or forearm. Never wring out a rag, fold it and press between open, flat hands or against the side of the sink. Do not lift a pot by its handle. Instead, use oven mitts and lift the pot from the sides or underneath with both hands open using your arm strength. Carry heavy objects on your forearms, or push them in a cart or along a convenient surface. Use thick tape or foam tubing to increase the diameter on your eating and grooming utensils, and other hand-held tools. Use an electric can-opener and an electric mixer, this will take away the need for tight closed gripping and twisting in the fingers and wrists. Leave all but the top buttons of your shirt buttoned and slip your shirt over your head (as buttoning can be very painful for some). There are hundreds of ways to change the way we do an activity, or to adapt tools to make daily living (work, leisure, grooming, house work, hobbies) more tolerable, and even pain free.

If you would like to know more about how to protect your joints and find out what resources are available to aid you in your daily tasks, contact an Occupational Therapist (OT). An OT is a health professional who is highly trained in the demands of daily life and can teach you how to adapt the way you use your hands to improve functioning/limiting pain. An OT is also an expert in adaptive assistive tools used in increasing ease of performance of everyday tasks.