

Hand Exercises After Surgery

Patient information from Mendip Hand Clinic

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This leaflet sets out the general hand exercises used after most hand operations, with a drawing of each one. It is designed to support, not replace, your conversation with Miss Edwards or your hand therapist.

Written by Miss Alison Edwards, Consultant Hand Surgeon. Published: September 2026.
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Before you start

Follow the instructions you have been given for your own operation. Some operations need a period of strict protection, and some need specific exercises that are not in this leaflet. Where your own instructions differ from this general guide, follow yours. The Patient Information and Consent leaflet for your operation sets out the timings that apply to you.

If your hand is in a bandage or splint, you can and should still move the fingers and joints that are outside it. Joints that are not moved stiffen up, and that stiffness can take longer to undo than the operation took to do.

Move gently. Some discomfort is normal. Sharp or increasing pain is not — stop, and if it persists, contact us.

What these exercises are for

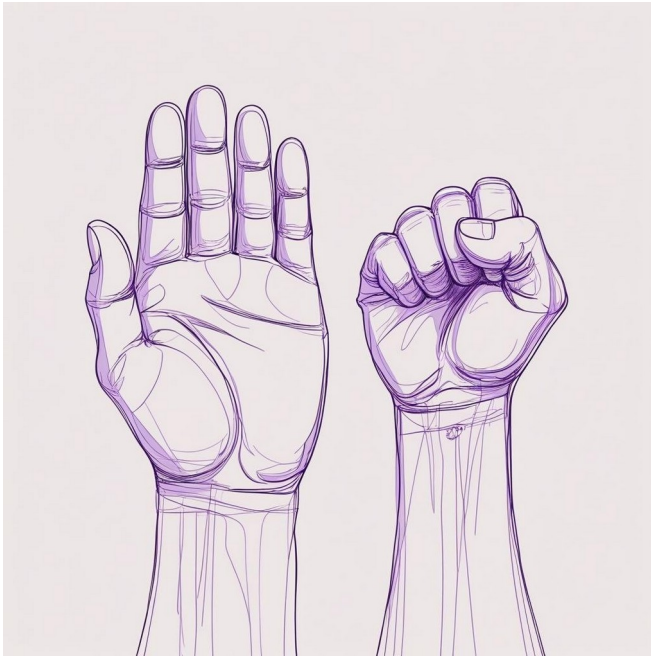
They are intended to reduce swelling, keep the joints moving, prevent stiffness, and help healing.

Little and often works better than one long session. Some swelling after exercising is normal and settles with elevation.

1. Making a fist, and straightening

What it does: keeps the finger joints moving and prevents stiffness.

1. Start with your hand open and your fingers straight.
2. Slowly bend all your fingers into a fist.
3. Hold for a few seconds.
4. Straighten your fingers fully, and hold.
5. Repeat 10 to 15 times, slowly.



A hand with the fingers held straight, and the same hand closed into a fist

2. Straightening the fingers fully

What it does: full straightening matters as much as full bending, and is the movement most often lost.

Rest your hand flat, palm down, and straighten the fingers as far as they will go. Hold for a few seconds.



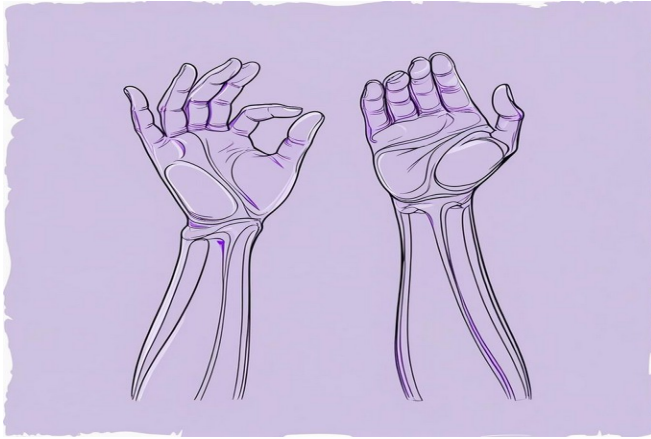
An open hand seen from the palm side with all the fingers straight

3. Thumb to fingertip

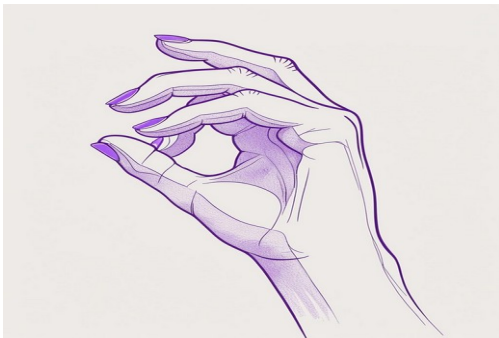
What it does: improves thumb movement and the dexterity you need for small tasks.

1. Start with your hand open.
2. Touch your thumb to the tip of each finger in turn.
3. Then bring your thumb across towards the base of your little finger.

4. Repeat 10 to 15 times.



A hand touching the tip of the thumb to the tip of a finger

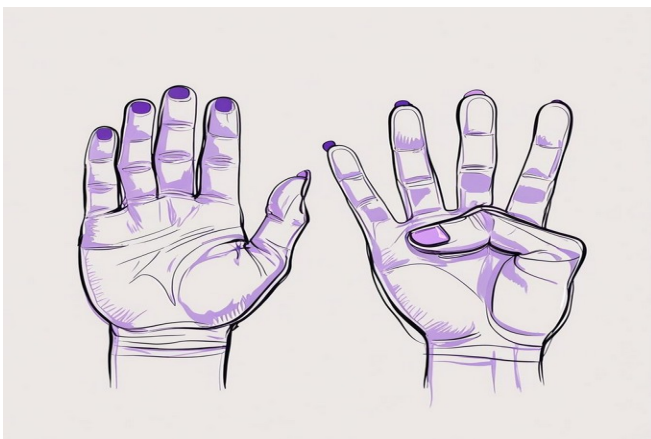


A hand bringing the thumb across the palm towards the little finger

4. Bending the thumb

What it does: keeps the joints of the thumb moving.

Bend the thumb across the palm and then straighten it again. Repeat 10 to 15 times.



A hand with the thumb held out straight, and the same hand with the thumb bent across the palm

5. Tendon glides

What it does: keeps the tendons moving freely inside their sheaths and helps stop scar tissue tethering them down.

Work through the positions in sequence:

1. Fingers straight.
2. A hook fist — bend the middle and end joints of the fingers, keeping the knuckles straight.
3. A full fist.
4. Fingers fully straight again.

Repeat the sequence 5 to 10 times.



A hand curled into a fist, one of the positions in the tendon glide sequence

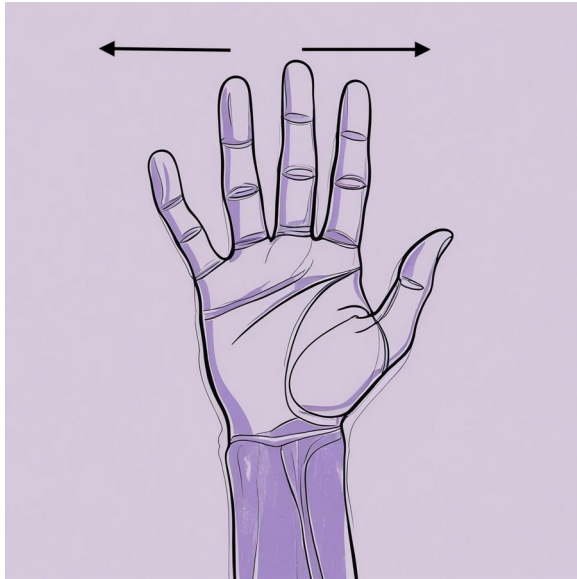


A closed fist seen from the front

6. Spreading the fingers

What it does: maintains the side-to-side movement of the fingers and helps prevent them tightening together.

1. Start with your hand flat and the fingers straight.
2. Spread your fingers wide apart, and hold for 5 seconds.
3. Bring them back together, and hold for 5 seconds.
4. Repeat 5 to 10 times.

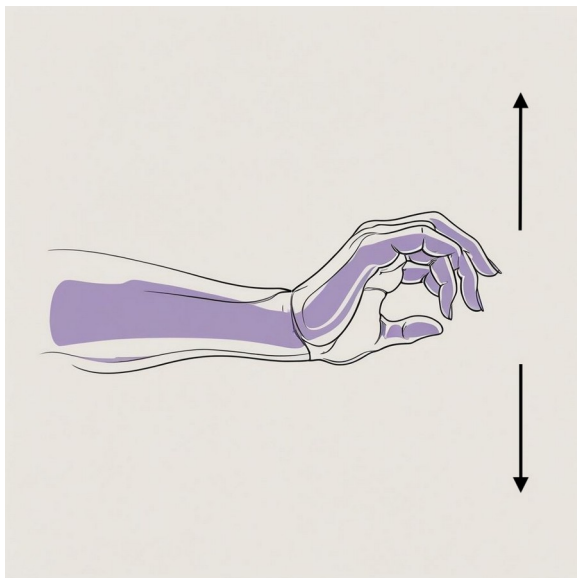


An open hand with the fingers spread apart, with arrows showing the fingers moving away from each other

7. Bending the wrist up and down

What it does: maintains wrist movement. Leave this one out if you have been told to rest your wrist.

1. Rest your forearm on a table with your hand over the edge.
2. Gently bend your wrist upwards, and hold for a few seconds.
3. Gently bend it downwards, and hold for a few seconds.
4. Repeat 10 to 15 times.



A forearm resting with the wrist bent upwards, with an arrow showing the direction of movement



A forearm resting with the hand and wrist bent downwards

Getting the most out of them

Swelling. Keep your hand elevated above heart level, particularly in the first few days and after exercising.

Timing. Exercising after a warm shower, when the tissues are more supple, is often easier.

Consistency. Short sessions several times a day achieve far more than one long session. Setting an alarm helps more than intending to remember.

Progress is not always steady. Plateaus and slightly worse days are normal and do not mean anything has gone wrong.

When to contact us

- Sharp or increasing pain during or after exercising
- Swelling that is getting worse rather than better
- New numbness, tingling or weakness
- Increasing redness, warmth, discharge or fever — signs of infection
- A feeling that you are not recovering at the pace you were told to expect. We can arrange for you to see the hand therapist or Miss Edwards quickly.

Contact details

Mendip Hand Clinic, Practice Plus Group Hospital, Old Wells Road, Shepton Mallet, Somerset BA4 4LP. Bookings: 0330 818 8981.

If you think anything in this leaflet is unclear or needs updating, please tell us using the contact details above.

A final note

This leaflet is general information and does not replace individual advice. The exercises and timings that apply to you should be confirmed with Miss Edwards or your hand therapist, in line with GMC guidance on decision making and consent.