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SUMMER 2007

# Arthritis and Hand Injury: Sudden Impact, Long-term Disability

It's lunchtime at an upscale mall. A child drops a cup of lemonade in front of the mall's most trendy fashion boutique. Rick, an aspiring young guitar player employed as a day janitor, tosses the cup in his trash cart. He glosses over the spill with his mop, leaving the polished marble slippery and wet.

A few minutes later, Ruth, a clothing designer in her mid-40s, slips on the wet floor. Instinctively, she puts out her hands, breaking her fall. She's been injured; a store manager calls the paramedics. Meanwhile, down at the loading dock, Rick and a co-worker are throwing their collected trash into a wobbly dumpster. Suddenly, the heavy metal lid falls on Rick's hand.

Ruth never even knew that she already had a mild case of arthritis, which will be badly exacerbated by her fall. Rick didn't have arthritis...but now, in time, he will.

In this article, I hope to show why attorneys who handle personal injury cases need to understand that arthritis can be triggered

## IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS



RON Y. GOLDSTEIN, M.D.

### What Is Arthritis, and Why Should You Care?

Essentially, arthritis is a swelling of the joints. The most common type, called osteoarthritis, affects 21 million adults in the U.S. Another type, rheumatoid arthritis, is an autoimmune condition that affects about 2 million Americans, most often

thing that a hand surgeon can evaluate, but which may go unrecognized by a generalist.

Another cruel connection involves a fresh injury to an already arthritic joint. Even in a person whose arthritis has no apparent symptoms—a common situation—a sudden impact can have devastating effects.

Again, a hand surgeon can help to make a case concerning the true consequences of an injury that may appear minor to someone without training in this subspecialty.

### Osteoarthritis: The Cartilage Dis-Connection

In osteoarthritis, the cartilage that cushions the joints breaks down. The body responds to the loss by growing new bone tissue, but not necessarily in the right place. The hands become stiff, the fingers weaken. The joints become larger and eventually misshapen. As bones grow and cartilage recedes, the space between the bones shrinks. Eventually, the bones may start rubbing against each other and can even develop odd growths called spurs. For

“ A person suffering a hand injury may not know the full impact until after the case is closed... ”

by an injury, that having arthritis even without symptoms can make seemingly minor hand injuries much worse, and why it's vital to consult a qualified hand surgeon for the benefit of the patient and to ensure a satisfactory outcome for all parties.

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women. Rheumatoid arthritis causes inflammation of the joints as well as the tissues surrounding them and the internal organs. There are actually many different kinds of arthritis. I'll be talking about osteoarthritis in this article.

A cruel connection links injury and arthritis, cruel because injuries can cause joints to become arthritic. But because the disease develops slowly, the long-term consequences—potentially chronic pain and disability—are too often overlooked in the tumultuous days following an accident. It can take months or even years for the impact of an injury to emerge completely. This is some-

many people, the result is a lifetime of pain and dysfunction.

Osteoarthritis most often affects the joints of the fingers, knees, hips, and spine; it can also affect the wrists, shoulders, elbows and ankles. You've probably noticed people with advanced osteoarthritis in their hands. Typically, these are older individuals whose fingers are swollen and sometimes severely deformed.

Adding the insult of physical injury to an arthritic joint—even one mildly affected—is often the beginning of a downward spiral of disability. One of the most common hand injuries involves damage to the CMC-1 joint

(also called the carpo-metacarpal joint) at the base of the thumb. Weakened by arthritis and compromised by bone cysts that may form unnoticed over time, a sudden impact causes chaos to this crucial joint. As pieces of bone shatter, the entire foundation of the joint collapses. The thumb falls, limp and useless. Since the thumb provides some 60 percent of the hand's function, its loss is catastrophic. Without treatment, it will never work properly again. But this is an obvious injury. Many times, the impact on an arthritic joint is more subtle and takes much longer to be realized.

Meanwhile, back to our patients. Ruth has been taken to the emergency room. Her x-rays show no fractures, and the ER physician overlooks the "minor" signs of arthritis on the films. This is not to say that the physician has been negligent, but had Ruth's x-rays been reviewed by a hand surgeon—one who examines dozens of hand x-rays in detail every day—the ultimate impact of her

injury would have been recognized.

As for Rick, his hand hurts badly, so he takes aspirin after work and notices some bruising the next morning. His fingers are so swollen he can barely play his guitar that night. But he ignores the accident because he doesn't want to make trouble at work. Little does he know that taking aspirin has already made his problem worse in the short term, promoting bleeding within the injured portion of the hand. Nor does he realize that without proper treatment, his injured fingers are far more likely to become arthritic.

### **Why Hands Matter**

It's all too easy to overlook our hands and our hand health. Like a strong set of teeth or two good legs, hands are something most people take for granted. But as a hand surgeon, I've seen many patients' quality of life compromised by osteoarthritis of the hand, hand injuries, and oftentimes both.

Having fully functional, nimble and sensitive hands is one of the anatomical advantages that separates humans from other animals. (Remember the "opposable thumb?") When a hand or wrist becomes dysfunctional, all those advantages—the ability to use a computer, key in phone numbers, drive, tweeze eyebrows, turn pages, calculate figures, twist open bottle caps, open locks, use a remote—become painful, even impossible tasks. Never mind opening jars, threading needles, pulling open a bag of popcorn, or the many hobbies your clients may enjoy—playing piano, gardening, painting...the list goes on.

The human hand has at least 27 bones. When arthritis attacks the hand's anatomy, it's like having a screw loose in a complex piece of machinery. The damage continues, and soon there are two loose screws...then more. Eventually you have a machine that doesn't work at all. Typically, as a person's  
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# Arthritis

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arthritic hand becomes stiffer and less functional, he or she will switch to the other hand, creating new stresses and inviting new injuries as the cycle of deterioration continues.

## Quality of Life: It's in Our Hands

As an attorney, you have a duty to look out for your client's best interests. In many personal injury cases, such as auto accidents, spinal injury or other issues become the focus of attention, and understandably so. But all too often, a person suffering a hand injury will never know the full impact it will have on his or her life until after the case is closed. Bones grow slowly, and arthritis takes time to develop. The real extent of damage may not become evident for years.

Speaking for my fellow hand surgeons, our job is to be an advocate for the patient's health over the long term—to ensure that all the necessary steps are taken, from careful x-rays and bone scans to medication and surgery. Our goal is to save our patients from a lifetime of pain by giving them the best care available, guided by an informed and effective treatment plan. This may involve splinting, bracing, and medications such as cortisone injections to reduce swelling. Depending on the injury, surgery may or may not be required, but in many

cases, it is the only way to put the hand's shattered foundation back together again. What's important is that in seeking a judgment, you and your client are properly aware of the long-term consequences of the accident and the potential costs of correcting the damage.

One of the most important things to remember is to get any client with a hand injury to see a hand surgeon immediately. There may be other health professionals who you are already familiar with—orthopedists, chiropractors, etc.—but you owe it to yourself, your practice and, above all, your clients to consult a subspecialist who can order appropriate diagnostic studies and prescribe treatments specific to hand injuries.

A hand surgeon will see that sensitive baseline tests are performed that will strengthen the case and benefit the injured party, both immediately and in the long run.

## Epilogue: Ruth and Rick

As for our injured parties, Ruth's hand injury went unnoticed. Her emergency room bills were covered by a small lawsuit against the mall, which was settled out of court. Over the next few years, Ruth found her hands becoming stiff and painful, making it difficult for her to sketch concepts, cut patterns or sew together sample designs. Eventually, she gave up her career as a couturier and went to work as an associate instructor in fashion merchandising

## First Aid for Hand Injuries

To reduce swelling, put an ice pack over a towel on the injured portion of the the hand for the first 24-48 hours. Keep the injured portion of the upper extremity elevated above the heart at all times in the first few days, towards the ceiling. DO NOT take aspirin or ibuprofen as they can increase bleeding and swelling. Oral medication, such as acetaminophen (Tylenol®) or codeine or Vicodin® (as prescribed), is OK for pain. In any case, get the client to a hand surgeon right away.

at a local community college.

Rick, a talented guitarist getting ready to cut his first demo CD, noticed his left hand never felt quite strong enough to press down on his guitar strings. Driven to succeed, he pushed himself to keep playing and developed a full-blown case of arthritis by age 40. He continues to work as a day janitor at the mall. With astute legal representation, a solid case, and evaluations and treatment by a fellowship-trained orthopedic hand surgeon, both these injured parties could be enjoying richer, more personally successful lives today.

(Fortunately, Ruth and Rick are fictional characters. The consequences of injury to the hand, and the impacts of arthritis, are all too real.) 🗡️

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- Tennis Elbow and other sports injuries

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