

Troubleshooting – Knitting

Knitters come in all shapes and sizes, all age groups, abilities and disabilities which is what makes it so wonderful. However, it does mean that not all of us will be able to knit in the conventional way! Some of us may need to adapt our technique in order to knit comfortably.

Even if you're happy to knit in the textbook way you'll still need to heed caution about your posture while you knit (see *Stitchlinks' Guide to Good Posture* included in your pack). If your hands and wrists have a tendency to ache after a long spell knitting you may need to pace your activity by incorporating several rest and stretching periods. These precautions can go a long way to preventing injuries such as repetitive strain (RSI) which could stop you knitting altogether, so it's a good idea to get into some good practice right from the start!

Others may need a little more help. The information below has been put together from Betsan's experience of working with health-based knitting groups over the last few years.

Many people with arthritis of the hands, wrists and neck, or conditions such as fibromyalgia affecting the hands and arms, stop activities such as knitting for fear it'll cause harm. They may be life-long knitters who really loved and miss the activity, or they may be new knitters who wish to use it as therapy or a hobby they can do from an arm chair.

The good news is that gentle exercise is good for the hands providing it is paced properly.

We would advise always checking with your doctor and to rest during any flare ups, though.

You can begin gently to gradually build up the amount of stitches you knit at any one time. Some of our patients are only able to knit five to ten stitches before they need a break and a stretch. They then go on to do a little more until they can gradually build up the stamina and strength in their hands. We often ask them to schedule in a little knitting (five or ten minutes) every hour or four times a day at the start. Hand exercise has never been so enjoyable!

Let's take a look at how you can make knitting easier if you are experiencing problems with hand, arm, shoulder or neck pain.

THE MATERIALS

Needles

The wooden, metal or plastic debate! These days there are all sorts of different needles available in all sorts of materials. Many people with hand problems prefer to use wooden needles as they have a little more give and are warmer, but don't assume that this will be the case for you – experiment with wooden, plastic and metal to discover your personal preference.

Stitches slide less easily on wooden needles so some of you may find this adds 'stiffness' to the flow of your movements – you may prefer the more slippery metal ones. Others prefer the less slippery wooden needles because it enables you to control your stitches making it less likely to lose them off the ends, particularly if you're using the double pointed variety.

Other knitters love the slipperiness of metal needles and the flow it gives their knitting plus, of course there's that rhythmic, meditative click, but then again you might be someone who finds it annoying. So the message is experiment and don't discount plastic – they've come a long way in recent years and can be a lot of fun!

Star tip – If you like knitting in front of the TV with your partner or family, the rhythmic click of needles may not be as meditative and calming for them!

Star tip – Beware of cheaper wooden needles, they may be a little rough. Generally speaking the more expensive ones are more polished and smoother.

Circular, square or even square circulars! – Modern circular needles are brilliant. They come in a range of interchangeable sizes, materials and uplifting colours. It's worth investing a little as the more expensive types have really flexible inter-connecting cables so you're not constantly wrestling with a rigid tangle of plastic and yarn! On the therapeutic aspect they're ideal if you have painful hands, arms or neck because the weight of your knitting can rest in your lap and you only have short ends to hold which greatly reduces the strain. Don't worry – you don't have to start knitting everything in the round as they can be used exactly like straight needles.

Square needles are a recent innovation and as the name suggests they have straight as opposed to rounded sides which you might find easier to grip. And yes, they're available as straight needles and square circulars!

Needle gauge

Don't fall into the trap of choosing projects with thicker needles because they're initially easier to hold. Take into account that they'll be heavier, need thicker yarn and ultimately result in a heavier project. Similarly very thin needles can be difficult to hold and the fine grip can be tiring. 4mm, 4.5mm and 5mm are a good size to start with.

If you love sock or lace knitting with fine yarns then intersperse these projects with ones that use thicker needles to give your hands a break from the fine grip needed for these. See 'Pacing your Knitting' on the next page.

THE YARN

Texture

Soft yarn with a little 'give' but without any 'bits' is advisable if you have problems, but the good news is this doesn't necessarily mean expensive! Dare we say it, but there are perfectly acceptable acrylic yarns out there enabling you to be prolific without breaking the bank. If you can get along to

your local yarn store it's a good idea to carry out a 'softness/give test' before you buy. Yarn without any 'give' can be hard on painful fingers, hands and wrists. Extra bits, furry stuff and fluff can get caught up in the stitches which will add to the stress on your hands too.

Star tip – Be a little wary of cotton – it may seem beautifully soft but it generally has no 'give' so can be hard on your hands!

Yarn Weight

Of course the weight of yarn you chose is dependent on the pattern you chose so while planning your next project it's something to bear in mind. Thicker yarn may seem easier to hold initially, but you need to take into account that it needs bigger, heavier needles and as your knitting grows, so will the weight of your project! Double Knitting (DK) is a good place to start.

POSTURE

Existing aches and pains can be improved and future problems can be avoided or minimised by taking care of your posture as you knit. The *Stitchlinks Guide to Good Posture* has all the information you need, so we're not going to repeat it here. A copy is included in the **Core Pack** and is also available to download from the Group Leader page on *iknitlinks* (www.iknitlinks.org) and the Your Health Matters page of the *Stitchlinks* website (www.stitchlinks.com/health.html).

There are some useful posture adaptations to make if you have existing upper limb or neck pain :-

- Place a pillow on your lap to support the weight of your hands and forearms.
- Use circular needles to take the weight off your hands.
- Relax your shoulders as you knit.
- Be aware of your neck posture.
- Avoid looking down as much as possible by raising your hands up on a pillow and clipping your pattern to a copy board (the ones secretaries use).
- Use a good light.
- Take regular breaks to walk around to stimulate your circulation and do some gentle finger and wrist stretches.
- Pace your knitting – see below.

PACING

If you've attended a Pain Management course you'll already know all about pacing! If not, you'll find a comprehensive article on the *Stitchlinks*, Your Health Matters page.

In brief, pacing is about not overdoing activities, whether it's housework or something more enjoyable such as knitting. You will probably have discovered by now that doing too much, too fast results in more pain, and perhaps a flare up which stops all activity for several days. In pain management terms this is called the overactivity / underactivity cycle.

This cycle describes the person with pain trying to fit in as much as possible on 'good' days but then 'paying the price' on subsequent days with increased pain. So life becomes a series of very full 'doing' days followed by a few 'not able to do anything' days. If you recognise this pattern, then pacing is the way to go for you! Even if you don't have this problem being sensible about not knitting for long hours without a break can prevent RSI in the future.

A good pacing regime aims at enabling you to 'do' everyday – it enables you to even out activity levels by breaking up projects into manageable chunks. So you knit for a bit, stopping just **BEFORE** you feel pain (with a bit of trial and error you'll learn how long this takes), then move on to either rest or to do another activity involving a completely different hand movement such as card making or scrapbooking, perhaps. You can then go back to your knitting later in the day or do a little every hour depending on how your hands feel.

When you feel ready, gradually increase the time you spend knitting by small increments which will enable you to slowly build up stamina and strength in your hands.

It may seem a little frustrating at first, particularly when you're engrossed in your project, but it should enable you to knit regularly and reach the end result in a similar length of time without increasing your pain. Give it a try and let us know how you get on.

FLARE UP DAYS

Flare up days are inevitable for anyone who has pain, in fact, we all have days where we feel downright Blaaaah! Learning to accept these as a part of life's normal ups and downs will take away some of the frustration.

You can make these days much more bearable if you plan for them in advance. Have some pre-cooked, 'flare up freezer meals' handy in your freezer and a supply of good knitting books and magazines put aside for such an event. Put your feet up, have some relaxing music on in the background and spend some enjoyable time planning your future projects.

Star tip – Flare up days won't seem as bad if you plan for them in advance.

THE PROJECTS

If you're using knitting therapeutically then we would advise having a few different projects on the go and swapping them around according to how you feel. Here are some ideas :-

Intricate Projects

An intricate project, or one that requires your full attention, can help to distract your mind from any problems or pain you might have. The level will very much depend on your knitting skills.

Mindless Projects

It's a good idea to have a 'mindless' task on the go too; one that is so easy you can switch off and escape into your own quiet sanctuary. The mindless task is a good one to take to groups – you won't miss out on the conversation!

Portable Projects

Keep a small portable project in your bag. They can be used to manage panic, anxiety, pain spasms and stress or relieve the boredom of commuting.

Large Projects

These can give you a tremendous sense of achievement when completed, but we would advise always have a smaller one on the go too. Finishing a project will make you feel good so only having a large one on the go may mean you have to wait a long time for this feelgood flush! Don't put a time limit on when you want it completed as this will put you under pressure and may diminish the therapeutic value.

Quick Projects

These are great for giving a quick reward to make you feel good, so if you're feeling down then lots of quick projects with vibrant colour are the way to go. There are numerous patterns for knitted accessories and socks which fit the bill perfectly.

Charity Projects

Research has shown that giving to charity stimulates the release of feelgood chemicals in your brain so, if you're feeling down, knitting for charity will help you whilst helping someone else too!

Colourful Projects

Vibrant colours can have a dramatic effect and raise mood, so choose colours that make you smile for that extra feelgood factor.

Team / Group Projects / Knitalongs

Group projects can motivate you to get involved in a charity project or you may wish to learn a new skill such as lace knitting together. Team activities can take place in your face-to-face group or via the *Stitchlinks* Forum where you can post pictures and share ideas with knitters around the world.

Developmental Projects

Learning new skills and having new experiences is good for your brain – it can open up new neural pathways and keep your brain active. There are always new techniques to learn and skills to master so keep challenging yourself to something different.

Luxurious Projects

There's no doubt that a bit of luxury goes a long way to making us feel great. There are few things better than knitting with luscious yarns in fab colours and textures and there are some wonderful examples on the market today. The experience is even more enhancing when you use beautiful needles that feel good in your hands. Touch and vision are powerful stimulants so take advantage of them to enhance your knitting experience.

Star tip – Next time you're asked what you want for your birthday or Christmas, ask for some luxurious knitting needles and yarn – relish how they feel in your hands.

GADGETS

Don't despair if knitting has become too painful. There are gadgets which can help :-

- **Handeze Therapeutic Gloves** are said to ease the pain and swelling of movement in those with arthritis. They come in a range of designs and are available from Heritage Stitchcraft (www.heritagestitchcraft.com/handeze/) for around £17 plus postage or from www.handeze.com for \$20 - \$30 plus postage.
- **Stitch Simply Knitting Aid** was initially developed for the designer's grandmother who has severe arthritis in her hands. It supports your wrists on a pad and holds your needles, so if you have a problem with grip it may be worthwhile trying. Experienced knitters may find it a little restricting and you may take a while to get used to the new technique. It's available from www.knittingaid.com for around £50.
- **The Knitting Loom or Board** looks a little like a manual knitting machine. Your conventional needles are replaced by a couple of strips of wood containing rows of pins. The knitter weaves yarn around these pins then hooks the 'stitches' over. The weaving movement can become rhythmical and relaxing, so if holding knitting needles has become impossible this could be a great alternative to try. You can clamp it to a table or place on a non-slip mat for ease of use. We bought a beautiful hand-made loom with adjustable gauge from Lakeside Crafts in the UK (01981 500 616) for £30 plus postage. They are available in the United States from www.knittingboard.com from around \$50 plus postage.

WHAT ABOUT CROCHET?

Crochet can be wonderfully rhythmic and relaxing too and we know many of you enjoy it. However if you have painful hands and wrists crochet needs to be done with extra care as the repetitive turning of the hand and forearm on the hook holding side can put a lot of extra stress on the hand and wrist. So you need to be aware of this, particularly if you already have hand and wrist pain.

Don't forget to let us know how you get on and keep in touch via Twitter and our Forum!