

# Does cracking your knuckles cause arthritis?

April 20 2023, by Mandi Harenberg

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Have you heard the old wives' tale that knuckle cracking will enlarge your knuckles? What about the one that cracking your knuckles causes arthritis?

There are many beliefs about this common behavior, but it's time to debunk the myths about knuckle cracking.

Why do people crack their knuckles?

[Harvard Health](#) cites several possible reasons.

"Knuckle cracking is a common behavior enjoyed by many," said [Dr. Robert Shmerling](#), a rheumatologist and senior faculty editor at Harvard Health. "It can become a habit or a way to deal with nervous energy; some describe it as a way to 'release tension.' For some, it's simply an annoying thing that other people do."

Sometimes people crack their knuckles out of habit. Like cigarette smoking, excessive knuckle cracking can become a hard habit to break. Stress relief is another reason why people crack their knuckles.

What causes the popping noise when you crack your knuckles?

[Dr. Thanda Aung](#), an assistant clinical professor in UCLA's Division of Rheumatology, explains there haven't been enough studies to explain the mechanism behind the cracking noise. However, she says there are two hypotheses.

The first is the popping noise "could be from the movement of all the structures" in the finger such as the bones, tendons and ligaments.

The second hypothesis has to do with the synovial fluid (the fluid that lubricates the joints) and the gas created from the [synovial fluid](#). Aung explains the cracking sound may result from the movement of this gas in and out of the tight space in the finger joints.

Now, does cracking your knuckles cause arthritis?

Aung referenced an [older study](#) on habitual knuckle cracking and hand function.

The study determined that "habitual knuckle crackers were more likely to have hand swelling and lower grip strength" compared to those who don't regularly crack their knuckles.

But the study also concluded there is "no clear evidence this habit is associated with osteoarthritis," Aung added.

"Nonetheless, in theory, although we don't have enough studies to support the association between knuckle cracking and osteoarthritis, if you manipulate your joints significantly, multiple times, for a significant duration of time, it can cause damage," she noted.

The bottom line: Knuckle cracking is a common behavior and Aung suggested there should be more studies conducted over a longer period of time to further understand its link to degenerative joint disease.

How can you stop cracking your knuckles?

Aung reports many of her patients ask questions about knuckle cracking. They disclose the primary reason they crack their knuckles is in response to stress and anxiety.

She offers some practical advice to her patients.

First, Aung recommends they practice breathing exercises and meditation. Experts agree there are clear physical and psychological benefits to these practices.

Harvard Health suggests following these simple steps to get started with [breath work](#) and [meditation](#).

As with any new strategy, developing a routine is key to sticking to it and reaping the benefits. The more practice you get with breathing exercises and meditation, the easier it will be to use these strategies at a time when you're feeling anxious or stressed out.

It's understood that knuckle cracking is often done subconsciously or without awareness. For this reason, Aung suggests "keeping your hands busy doing something else" as a solution.

There are multiple ideas for this, including stress balls, fidget toys, therapy putty and drawing or doodling. The best advice is to find something that works for you and your situation.

Finally, Aung suggests trying common anxiety and stress relievers such as [healthy eating](#), exercise, connecting with others and journaling.

While there's no definitive evidence to suggest knuckle cracking causes arthritis, it may be worth pursuing healthier ways to deal with anxiety and stress and finally break this habit.

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