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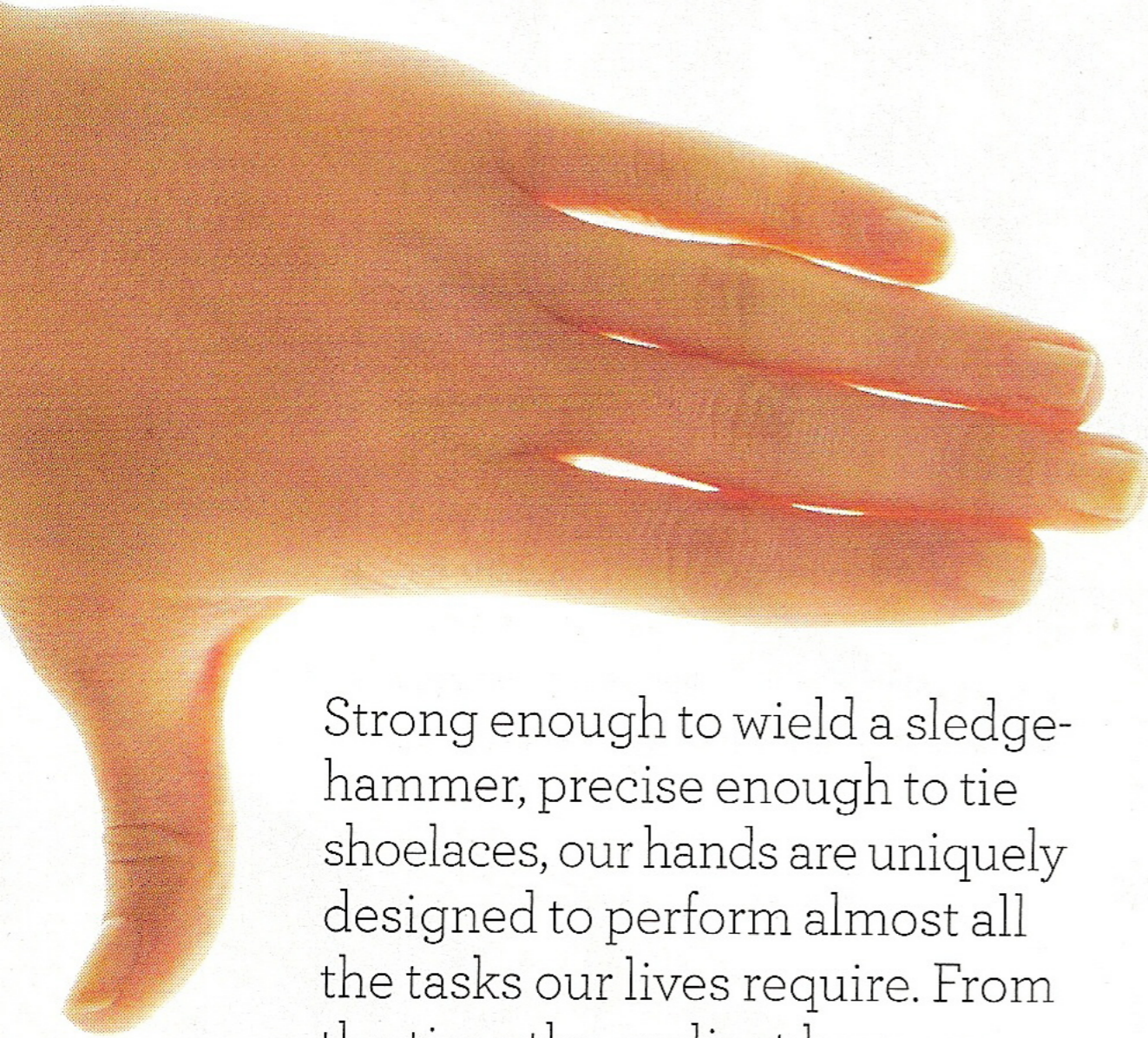


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# USER'S GUIDE

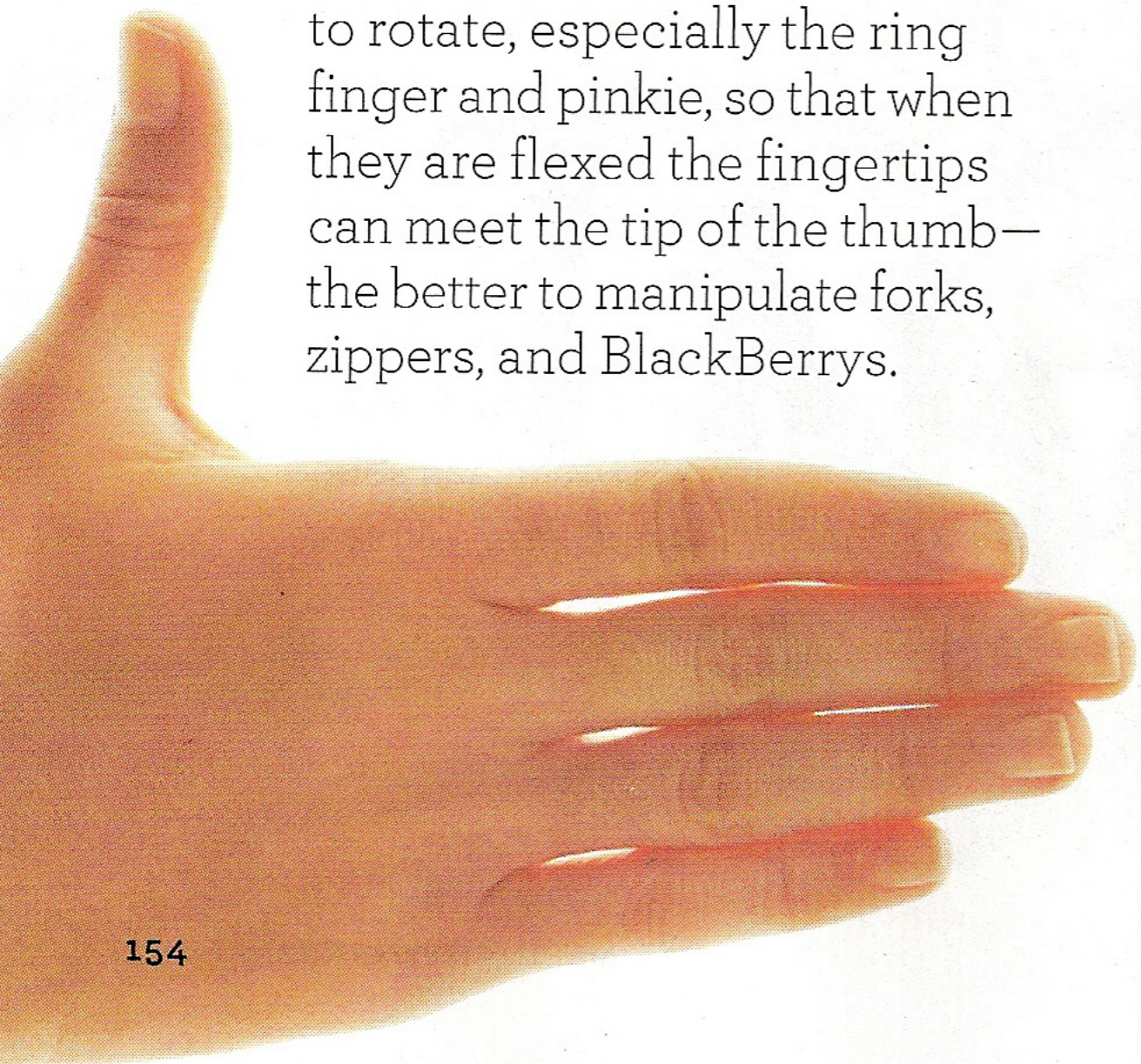
*How to hold on to healthy hands*

TEXT BY MARY DUENWALD PHOTOGRAPHS BY RAYMOND HOM



Strong enough to wield a sledgehammer, precise enough to tie shoelaces, our hands are uniquely designed to perform almost all the tasks our lives require. From the time the earliest humans began to walk upright, their hands were free to evolve, in concert with their brains, and become adept at using every sort of tool and weapon, large and small.

The thumb grew longer and more muscular, while the other fingers shortened and, along with the palms, grew fatty pads—the better to grasp, hold, and swing clubs and hammers, or baseball bats, golf clubs, and tennis rackets. At the same time, the fingers came to be set at an angle and developed the ability to rotate, especially the ring finger and pinkie, so that when they are flexed the fingertips can meet the tip of the thumb—the better to manipulate forks, zippers, and BlackBerrys.



“We can cup our hands to accommodate them to the shapes of all different objects,” says Mary Marzke, an emeritus professor at Arizona State University’s School of Human Evolution and Social Change.

We depend on our hands so much that it is easy to forget that they are also delicate instruments, each constructed of 27 little bones, overlaid with a webbing of tendons and nerves, supported by muscle and covered in flexible skin. Because of this complexity, and because our hands are in front of us every day—typing, shuffling papers, feeding, dressing, shaking hands, getting themselves dirty or wet, sometimes bracing us from a fall—they are susceptible to injury and illness. This is increasingly so as we reach or pass middle age. Women are especially prone to developing conditions such as arthritis, tendinitis, and carpal tunnel syndrome.

“Hands are vulnerable because you’re sticking them everywhere,” says Steven Yang, M.D., an orthopedic hand surgeon in New York City who is on the faculty of the New York University School of Medicine. “It keeps me in business.”

It may be only when something goes wrong that we come to appreciate just how useful our hands are. “Nobody realizes how much they use their hands until I take one away by immobilizing it in a splint or a cast,” says Jennifer Moriatis Wolf, M.D., an orthopedic hand specialist and assistant professor of orthopedic surgery at the University of Colorado.

But most hand problems can be fixed or at least managed by doctors like Yang and Wolf. Here are seven of the most common hand health issues and how they can best be treated.

## COMMON CONDITIONS

**FRACTURES** can happen to any of the bones of the hand in any number of ways, but people are prone to a few basic breaks. By far, the most common is a wrist fracture, which usually occurs when someone uses a hand to brace for a fall. This type of break happens most often in women over 50, as they begin to develop osteoporosis.

Men are more susceptible to fracturing their distal radius—the hand end of their lower arm bone. This injury is sometimes called a boxer’s fracture, because it happens when someone punches a solid object, usually to let off steam. “Just about every week I’ll see a guy who says, ‘I was really frustrated or angry, and I punched a wall,’” Yang says.

Children, for their part, are prone to breaking fingers in slammed windows and car doors and at play.

Because the bones in the hand are small, it is often not enough to apply a splint to broken ones. Sometimes a surgeon must go under the skin to attach pins, wires, plates, or screws to the bone to set it properly.

**ARTHRITIS** is a painful but very ordinary condition of the joints that occurs when the smooth cartilage, which usually acts as a shock absorber at the ends of the bones, wears down so that there’s more friction between

the bones. This can cause the joints to swell and hurt, making it difficult for them to move properly. Bone spurs, another result of the condition, can make hands look lumpy and old. According to the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons, one of every five Americans has at least one joint with signs of arthritis. Most cases are osteoarthritis, which arises from injury or wear, or rheumatoid arthritis, a systemic inflammatory condition. "Everyone will get some osteoarthritis if they live long enough, but the severity and age of onset are somewhat influenced by heredity," Yang says.

Osteoarthritis often occurs in the finger joints, and it is common at the base of the thumb, a very flexible joint. Wolf is doing research to explore the possibility that the reason women are susceptible to base-of-thumb arthritis is that their joints are very loose, possibly because of the reproductive hormones their bodies make during their childbearing years.

Arthritis can be treated with anti-inflammatory medications and sometimes with splints that keep people from using the joints during flare-ups. Surgery is an option, too. Surgeons can treat base-of-thumb arthritis, for example, by removing the trapezium bone in the wrist. The finger joints can be replaced with stainless steel implants or be fused together. Women sometimes have this done even if they are not in pain, just to make the swelling go away so their fingers don't look knobby and red.

**CARPAL TUNNEL SYNDROME** is not nearly as widespread a problem as people think. "Everybody who comes to my office and has an ache or pain in their hand thinks they have carpal tunnel syndrome," Yang says. In fact, this condition announces itself not with

pain but with numbness and tingling in the thumb, which then spreads to the middle and ring fingers.

It is a myth that carpal tunnel syndrome is caused by too much computer use, although working on a computer keyboard can be painful for people who have the condition. Carpal tunnel syndrome occurs when the median nerve, which runs from the arm to the hand, becomes pinched inside the carpal tunnel, a pathway at the wrist that the nerve shares with nine tendons. Doctors don't know why the nerve becomes pinched in some people, but they do know that the condition is more prevalent in people who use vibratory tools such as jackhammers and lawn mowers a lot and in those with diabetes, hypothyroidism, or arthritis. It's especially common during pregnancy. And women get it three times as often as men do.

Physical therapists use massage to ease the pain, and doctors sometimes prescribe a wrist brace to rest the hand. Cortisone injections also work for many people. But if the condition is very bad, there is a risk of lasting nerve damage, and a surgeon must cut the transverse carpal ligament that forms the roof of the carpal tunnel.

**TENDINITIS**, or inflammation of tendons, is similar to carpal tunnel syndrome in that the inflammation occurs where tendons pass through small tunnels in the hands, much like wires through an electric cord. It can cause a condition that is called trigger finger, in which a tendon that bends a finger—usually a ring finger—becomes swollen enough to catch inside its tunnel. Any attempt to flex the finger causes it to catch a bit and then pop into place. In severe cases, the finger won't straighten on its own at all but must be pried straight.»

## SOFT TOUCH

When hands become dry or chapped—because they've spent too much time in water or cold, dry weather—you'll want to douse the fire of inflammation and restore their natural moisture. Almost any hand lotion will work, doctors say. Linda Franks, M.D., a dermatologist in New York City, likes L'Occitane Shea Butter Hand Cream. Jennifer Moriatis Wolf, M.D., an orthopedic hand specialist at the University of Colorado, advises choosing a hand cream that contains sunscreen. "We certainly see skin cancer on the hand," she notes.

For severe dryness and chapping, Franks recommends using a heartier cream mixed with hydrocortisone, an anti-inflammatory. Her recipe is to put about two ounces of over-the-counter 1 percent hydrocortisone cream into a 16-ounce jar of Cetaphil Moisturizing Cream and blend with a spoon.

Doctors may also prescribe a new product called Tetrax, which contains ceramides, cholesterol, and phytosphingosine—a formula that tests have shown can help heal chapped hands.

## ➤ A SIMPLE STRETCH

Use one hand to press the thumb of the other hand down to its palm for 30 seconds, and then gently pull the thumb away from the palm for 30 seconds.

