

# Playing guitar with arthritis

by

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## Introduction and health warning

Neither Dan nor Mike has any medical qualification nor, come to that, any significant medical knowledge. What follows comes entirely from web research, reading and the shared experiences of arthritic guitar players. It is most definitely not medical advice.

If you have pain in your hands and wish to play the guitar, you need to talk to your doctor. There are many reasons, as well as arthritis, why your hands might be painful and trying to play, despite the pain, may be the worst thing you could do.

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Dan specialises in teaching fingerpicking to older students, some of whom have arthritis in their hands. Mike played guitar many years ago and took it up again when he first noticed arthritis developing in his hands. Both of them are very interested in the relationship between guitar playing and arthritis. In particular, they wanted to know whether guitar playing really could ease the symptoms of arthritis.

Many guitarists have arthritis. Keith Richards is probably the most famous but Les Paul had it for 50 years and believed that playing the guitar kept his arthritis under control. We were particularly concerned that guitar playing might actually make arthritis worse but fortunately, according to the rheumatologist who wrote an article on Keith Richards:

*"Although there has been some speculation in the media that his playing may have contributed to the development of his arthritis, there's no evidence that playing any instrument wears joints out quickly. Musicians get arthritis, just like the rest of us."*

Dr Chris Jenner pain management consultant at Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust also supports the view that exercising arthritic joints is generally helpful:

*Although it was once thought that using the affected joints would bring about further degeneration and lead to greater levels of pain, in fact exercise and physical activity are absolutely key to reducing pain levels and maintaining mobility. Although there are certain occasions when stepping down physical activity is advisable, such as where there is significant and active inflammation, in most cases arthritis symptoms respond extremely favourably to regular exercise. It is, however, important to take advice from a medical practitioner who is qualified and experienced in the treatment of arthritis so that you properly understand what type of exercise and physical activity is likely to be beneficial and so that you can learn how to carry out these activities safely.*

*Jenner, Chris. Arthritis: A Practical Guide to Getting on With Your Life (William Lorimer) (p. 151). Little, Brown Book Group. Kindle Edition.*

All the authorities we have encountered agree that frequent low-impact movement of arthritic joints will improve flexibility and strength. It also seems likely that exercise produces pain-killing and anti-inflammatory chemicals at the joints. Thus, we can be pretty sure that guitar playing neither causes arthritis nor makes it worse but it can make an important contribution to controlling it. However, overdoing it or excessive hand exercising, e.g. with hand exercising machines, can cause serious problems.

Many guitar players with early stage arthritis report some pain early on but after that the pain and swelling subsides and finger flexibility improves. That was certainly Mike's experience.

Nevertheless, pain is not a good sign so do not push it too far. If it hurts too much stop and if necessary, visit your doctor.

## Guitars and other kit

Some guitars are much easier to play than others. For example, a wide fretboard is easier for arthritic fingers than a narrow one. An electric guitar is easier to play than an acoustic because it has lighter strings, a lower action and the strings require less deflection to make a loud sound. However, whatever guitar you play, it will be easier to play when setup by a skilled luthier. This is particularly true with light strings and a low action because that combination is prone to buzzing. The difference between a guitar setup by an expert and one setup by some guy in a music shop can be amazing. Unfortunately, finding a real luthier may take some searching so don't rush it.

Zager Easy Play guitars are advertised as being much easier to play for people with arthritic hands. Web reviews suggest that they are fairly standard wide necked guitars that are well made in the Philippines and then carefully setup in the US with light strings and a low action. A good luthier could probably setup any decent acoustic to be much the same.

Holding a pick with arthritic fingers can be difficult and does not provide much useful exercise for the right hand. Fingerpicking is far better. If you must use a pick, it may be worth trying a thumb pick or a thick one with a grip surface. Some people with grip problems swear by the expensive but beautiful Hufschmid plectrums.

Playing with a capo reduces the distance the left-hand fingers have to stretch so is worth trying. Fitting it somewhere between the second and fifth fret will probably give the best balance between shorter stretch and enough space for arthritic fingers.

More advanced players may find that they can use a capo to minimise the use of barres (more on this later). This may need to be accompanied by modified fingering for some chords. Even without a capo, it may be possible to modify fingering to avoid painful fingers.

Open chord tuning and playing with a slide or bottleneck reduces chord fingering to a minimum. For example, tuning to E B E G# B E means that the open strings play E major and moving the slide will play a major chord based on the 6<sup>th</sup> string root.

If this style of playing appeals, you may want to look at the ingenious Rock-it slide designed for people with arthritis ([www.rock-itbarre.com/arthritis.html](http://www.rock-itbarre.com/arthritis.html) and Amazon). It uses D tuning and a rocking slide with knobs to allegedly play 101 chords. Neither Dan nor Mike have tried it.

## Practicing

In a way, arthritis is good news for your guitar practice because the motivation to keep arthritis at bay is immeasurably greater than the motivation to play another riff slightly better. The only downside is that you will probably need to spend more time practicing and a greater percentage of it on exercises and drills, particularly once you start to see the benefits in your hands. However, you can be confident that nothing you do to fight arthritis will hurt your progress in guitar playing. Mike was surprised by how much his guitar playing improved when he focussed on practicing to fight the arthritis rather than just practicing.

Arthritis doesn't like cold or damp so find a warm, dry place to practice. One arthritic guitarist suggested Australia!

You must have a comfortable chair or stool that allows you to sit with good posture. A piano stool is great because you can get the height exactly right and are forced to sit with good posture. If you have arthritis in your back, you may find an orthopaedic chair works best.

It is ideal if you can leave your guitar out during the day so you can practice little and often, particularly if your fingers get stiff or sore quite quickly. Even if they don't, you should break at least every 20 minutes to walk around and wiggle your fingers.

Hanging a mirror behind your music stand is also helpful so that you can immediately see if your body or your hands are in an awkward position. Keeping your left wrist straight is important and it is much easier to check this in a mirror rather than feel it or look at it directly (more on this later).

Before starting your practice, you should ensure that your hands are warm. Off-guitar warm up exercises that move your hands, wrists and forearms are good. Soaking your hands in warm water helps. Some arthritic guitarists also report that rubbing Voltarol or similar deep heat cream into your hands before you practice helps.

## Playing

Always start a practice session with at least a few minutes of simple stuff played slowly and deliberately, focussing on the basics. Using a light touch, pressing the string onto the fret not the fretboard and keeping the fingertips upright are all particularly important when playing with arthritis because they allow you to move the joints without stressing them.

Thumbs often suffer from arthritis more than fingers. We mentioned above that you may want to try a thumb pick on the right hand. However, arthritis in the left thumb is usually a bigger problem. Some guitarists believe that the purpose of the left thumb is to apply a death grip to the neck of the guitar. This is a very bad idea with an arthritic thumb.

The best way to think about the left-thumb is to remember how you learnt to use a compass in school geometry. At first you stuck the point firmly through the page, the exercise book and, if possible, the desk and still drew wonky circles. After a while you could draw perfect circles without even leaving a mark on the page. The left-thumb is the same. It locates the fingers by its position but needs hardly any pressure.

If you have arthritis in your left-thumb, you must minimise the pressure on it, so practice that. It is a good idea to practice some of your warm up exercises without the thumb touching the neck of the guitar. You may be surprised how easy this is. Mike has a left-thumb problem so practices no-thumb barres up and down the neck on a daily basis as well as other no-thumb exercises. This forces the finger pressure to come from the weight of the arm and the muscles of the upper arm instead of from the thumb.

Most authorities on playing with arthritis stress the importance of keeping the left wrist straight. This is particularly important if you have arthritis in the wrist but it also ensures that the fingers press on the strings at the least stressful angle. As mentioned above, playing in front of a mirror make this easier.

If you are not used to keeping your wrist straight, it can take a bit of practice. The secret is to watch the line between the big knuckle of you index finger and your elbow. This should be as straight as possible both front to back and right to left. The easiest way to straighten it is usually to move your elbow. You don't need to think of the line as a steel rod, just as straight as is comfortable in its normal position.

A straight left wrist is much easier if you play in a classical “neck up” posture. If you usually play in a neck down posture you may find that raising the neck is more comfortable for your wrist, thumb and possibly your fingers.

The full barre is widely considered to be something to avoid if you have arthritis. However, we think this may be wrong in some cases. It is commonly believed that the barre is difficult for beginners because it takes time to build the strength necessary in the muscle between the thumb and index finger. This is nonsense. A full barre needs only the lightest pressure from the left thumb and can even be played without the thumb.

A full barre needs three things. First, the index finger must be very close to the fret and even slightly beyond it so long as it doesn't mute any strings. That minimises the pressure needed. Second, the second finger must be bent, otherwise it acts as a fulcrum that levers the other fingers off the frets. Third, the finger pressure must come from the weight of the left arm with perhaps a bit of help from the upper arm and shoulder muscles.

A barre is tricky because of the awkward stretch between the index and other fingers and because a lot of pressure is transmitted through the index finger knuckle and the wrist. However, whether this is a problem depends on the location of the arthritis. If it is a problem and hurts, then of course the barre should be avoided but Keith Richards can play barre chords rather well.

Perhaps the most important playing advice is never to use the arthritis as an excuse for poor technique. If you find something difficult, it would probably be just as difficult without arthritis. If the cause really is arthritis, it is particularly important to work at overcoming the problem. As soon as you let the arthritis restrict the movement in a joint, it will creep and eventually you will have a claw instead of a hand and have to drink your beer through a straw!

For what it is worth, after three years of guitar practice, Mike's hands are more flexible than they have ever been. The deterioration from the arthritis has been easily outweighed by the improved flexibility from regular guitar practice.

## Practice

If you have good technique, any guitar practice that improves your playing is likely to be good for your arthritis.

This is because arthritis benefits from lots of gentle movement of the joints. You can often ease stiff joints or ease the pain in painful joints by gently moving them for a while. It is obviously much more enjoyable to do this by playing the guitar for half an hour rather than spending the same time doing physiotherapy exercises. Although, warming up with some physiotherapy exercises is a great idea.

Unfortunately, arthritic joints hate being heavily loaded, whether they are moving or not. Some examples of poor technique put excessive load on the finger and wrist joints so, if this applies to you, fixing it is an absolute priority. Particularly watch out for pressing excessively hard with the left-hand fingers or the left-hand thumb or pressing increasingly hard if you hold the same chord for several bars.

Good technique is about playing with the minimum effort and the maximum accuracy so focusing on this for your arthritis will also feed into your guitar playing so it is a total win-win. This may sound like a plug for Dan's book “Essential Guitar Technique” and to an extent it is because a lot of Dan's students are in the older age group where finger flexibility can be an issue. For them, good technique is particularly important and Dan had them very much in mind

when we wrote the book. Dan currently has a special offer including this book. [Download Guitar Domination Super eBook Bundle \(eliteguitarist.net\)](http://eliteguitarist.net)

While practicing with arthritis is basically the same as normal practice, there are some important differences of emphasis. Many guitar teachers tell you to “practice what you can’t play not what you can play”. In other words, practice the stuff you find difficult. Practice for arthritis is almost the reverse. You need to keep the fingers moving for as long as you can. This means a much greater focus on playing easy stuff for fun and not stopping after the statutory 20 minutes. You may have to practice for longer by adding more easy fun stuff to your normal practice but that is a very small price if you can ease your arthritis.

The following ideas may help make your practice “arthritis friendly” but still effective:

- 1 Warm up with some repetitive drills to get the fingers moving. It is a good idea to do some of them without the left-thumb touching the neck of the guitar. This gets you used to not putting pressure on your thumb and is particularly valuable if you have arthritis in the base of the left-thumb.  
Exercises involving hammer-ons and pull-offs are particularly good for building finger strength but don’t let them get painful.
- 2 Practice your repertoire pieces. Aim to play them really well with good technique. Play them straight through several times to the metronome without a mistake. Working to increase the speed but still without making any mistakes is a good challenge that keeps the fingers moving.
- 3 Work on new pieces by breaking them into logical chunks of a few bars and practice each chunk by playing it over and over at first slowly and then speeding up when you can play it perfectly. As with the repertoire pieces, you are using the metronome to keep you going and keep the fingers moving.
- 4 Practice fingerpicking chord sequences that change fairly often. Again, the idea is to keep going and to keep the fingers moving. If the same chord is repeated for more than a couple of bars, be careful not to press harder and harder. Strumming loads the right-thumb so is not very arthritis friendly but fingerpicking, the more complex the better, is a fantastic exercise for finger flexibility.