



Safe Cooking Tips

The American Society of Hand Therapists offers the following recommendations for prevention and safety tips to avoid hand injury and trauma in the kitchen.

1. **Use the right tool for the job** – Use easy-to-grip versions of tools like spoons, knives and bottle/can openers to decrease stress on your hands. Use scissors to open bags (or packages) instead of your thumbs. Look for tools with oversized handles (rather than narrow/standard); this will allow you to get the job done without requiring a tight grip and pinch.
2. **Sit or stand up straight** – Correct posture is important because the nerves that operate your fingers start in your neck. Slouching puts pressure on the neck and shoulders, which can hinder the amount of motion in your arms and hands, or may cause pain radiating down your arms. During activities that require you to be looking down at what you are doing, such as chopping vegetables, take a moment to stand up straight, turn your head side to side/up and down and stretch your arms over your head.
3. **Slide, do not lift** – Do not lift heavy pots and pans; slide them off burners and onto hot pads along the counter whenever possible. When working in the oven, always slide the shelf out so you can get a good, safe grasp of the panhandles. If the pot is heavy, ask for help. This may take more time, but always choose safety over speed in the kitchen.
4. **Use mitt-style potholders** - The mitt-style potholder is generally safer than the simple flat design because it protects both the top and bottom of your hands and lets you concentrate on picking up the hot dish rather than trying to keep a flat potholder from sliding away from the hot handle.
5. **Clean cutlery carefully** - When washing your cutlery, do not put knives and sharp tools in the soapy dishwater and then search blindly to find them. If you miss the handle and grab the blade, you may cut the tendons in your hand, which may require surgery and rehabilitation. Instead, clean knives individually with soap and water and rinse immediately.
6. **Use lightweight kitchen equipment** - Using plastic instead of glass when having a house full of guests is safer for many reasons. Plastic is not likely to break and it is easier to stack. It is also easier to transport from room to room due to its lighter weight.
7. **Keep your shoulders down** – While working in the kitchen, your arms should be at your sides and the counters you work on should be waist high. Many kitchen counters are too high for the average person. As a result, you may be forced to raise the shoulder you are using to cut the food and lean to the opposite side of your body when preparing food. This causes increased stress on the neck, shoulder and arm muscles and nerves.
8. **Don't use the naked hand with jars and tops** – Unscrewing a tight jar lid can be tough on your finger and wrist joints. Before you open any jar or bottle, turn it upside down and tap the bottom lightly against the countertop two or three times. Listen for the jar to pop, indicating the suction has been broken. If the jar has previously been opened, you may try running the lid under warm water to soften any dried product holding the lid closed, then use a rubber top or a “Y” jar opener to finish opening the top. Or select cans at the store that can be opened with an electric can

opener. It is recommended to use an electric can opener whenever possible as this activity can be particularly difficult for those with weakened or sore hands.

9. **Stretch** – *Note: These exercises should never be painful when completing them. You should only feel a gentle stretch. Should you experience pain, please consult a hand therapist or physician.*

- Perform simple hand and arm stretches to improve flexibility as well as reduce the possibility of stress or strain in your upper extremities.
- Begin by bringing your arms to your side for a brief shake, just to relieve some tension.
- Then perform a "prayer stretch" by placing your palms together with your fingertips pointing towards the ceiling and stretching downward until a stretch is felt on the underside of your forearms. You may also accomplish this by placing your hand at the edge of the countertop and, keeping your hand flat on the counter, bend your wrist up and then down as far as comfortably tolerated.
- Next straighten out your elbows in front of you and make a GENTLE fist as you bend your wrists down. Continue until a stretch is felt on the back side of your forearms.
- Finally, make a tight fist and then straighten your fingers, spreading them apart as much as you can.
- Hold each position for a count of three, and then repeat three to four times.
- Just prior to resuming your cooking project, also perform about 5 slow shoulder rolls, emphasizing rolling away from your ears.

10. **Pay attention** – It is hard to focus on the task at hand when family and friends are vying for your attention. When chopping, removing hot items from the oven or carrying a heavy object, it is important to take your time and watch what you are doing. These are prime opportunities to have an accident, which could result in a cut or burned or injured finger, hand or arm.