

Strengthening And stretching for Rheumatoid Arthritis of the Hand (SARAH). A randomised controlled trial and economic evaluation

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Plain English summary

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Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) causes inflammation in the joints and often affects people's hands. Common symptoms are pain and swelling which cause reduced strength and movement of the hands. This can make carrying out day-to-day activities difficult. It is not known if exercises are helpful for people with hand RA. This study investigated if a hand and wrist exercise programme improved hand function in people with RA. We also studied the cost to deliver this treatment in the NHS.

We randomly allocated 490 adults who attended rheumatology clinics in 17 NHS trusts with RA of the hand to standard care or standard care plus an exercise programme delivered by a hand therapist. Standard care was one to three sessions and included education about protecting their joints, general exercise advice and splints if needed. The exercise programme consisted of six sessions of strengthening and stretching hand and wrist exercises, daily home exercises and strategies to help participants to do their exercises regularly.

Participants attended an assessment with a researcher before treatment and then 4 and 12 months later. Information was collected about hand function, pain, quality of life, measures of strength and movement and medication and health-care use. The exercise programme resulted in increased hand function at 4 and 12 months' follow-up compared with standard care. It did not cause an increase in pain or side effects and was likely to be cost-effective to deliver in the NHS. We interviewed 14 participants who found the exercise programme to be acceptable.

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