Protect Your Hands

1. Carrying Heavy Groceries
Carrying multiple plastic bags together poses a challenge for fingers, wrists and elbows. Shoppers often strain their delicate finger joints or arms lifting too much weight awkwardly. If you have to use plastic, carry one bag at a time in each hand. It would actually be better to ask for paper bags instead of plastic, and carry them using both arms under the bag rather than grasping them with your fingers. When grocery shopping, use a cart instead of a small basket, which can be difficult to grasp as the weight of its content increases. A gallon of milk weighs about eight pounds. Lifting it out of the refrigerator with only your fingertips in the handle can torque and twist the joints. Always use two hands to lift heavy gallons, jugs and bottles.

2. Bagel Hand
Ask doctors and hand therapists what they believe to be the most dangerous food for possible injury during preparation or serving and many will say “bagels!” Thousands of people each year end up in the emergency room from slicing more than just their bagels. According to the Department of Emergency Services at George Washington Hospital in Washington, D.C., the greatest under-reported injury is hand cuts from slicing bagels. Some emergency rooms have even started calling the ligament and tendon damage “bagel hand.” Many of these injuries are so severe they require surgery and months of hand therapy in order to regain normal movement and function. Use a bagel slicer instead of a knife. If you don’t own a bagel slicer, place the bagel flat on a table with your hand on top of the bagel and hold firmly. Use a serrated knife to slice halfway through the bagel, keeping the blade horizontal to the table. Stand the bagel on its end and finish slicing downward while gripping the upper sliced half. Never try to slice a frozen bagel.

3. Dishwashing Disasters
Another reason to hate washing dishes! We see people everyday that put knives and sharp tools in soapy water and then search blindly for them. Many of these cuts affect tendons and require surgery and rehabilitation. Be mindful of wine glasses and other glass items while washing dishes. A common injury reported in hand clinics are lacerations to the extensor tendons on the top of the knuckles caused by washing glasses. If you place your hand inside of a narrow glass with a sponge and squeeze the sponge, the pressure of your hand may shatter the glass, causing cuts to the back of your hand. Soap up a sponge and place it inside of the glass instead of your hand.

4. Reading in a Pinch
When reading for an extended period of time, whether at work analyzing reports or at home with your favorite novel, hold the book with one hand flat on the front pages and the other flat on the back of the book. Even better: rest the book on a desk or incline surface rather than pinching paper corners and edges. Constant pinching while reading increases finger and thumb strain and stiffness. Continuously pinching pages can aggravate the tendons and joints in the thumb and wrist. This also applies to opening packages or tearing open the paper flap on cereal or snack boxes. Anything that is sealed can pose a problem. Be careful. Use scissors or other tools for these activities.

5. Untreated Minor Wounds
Some of the worst injuries hand therapists see everyday can begin as a simple paper cut or thorn prick that is left untreated. Untreated minor wounds can carry bad microbes that flare into dangerous infections. Wash thoroughly with warm water and soap for several minutes after any type of injuries to the hands, fingers or arms, especially when the skin has been penetrated. It’s important to monitor even the smallest injuries to prevent them from becoming bigger problems. If an area of redness appears around the wound, or the cut becomes warm, larger or irritated, seek medical consultation immediately.