

# STRONGER HANDS AND FINGERS

By Dr. Lisa Erikson



## SIMPLE PUTTY EXERCISES STRENGTHEN SMALL BUT IMPORTANT MUSCLES

Using flexible putty as resistance training is ideal for hands and fingers. Similar to core training while sitting on an unstable ball, squeezing and kneading pliable putty forces those smaller, overlooked muscles in the hands and fingers to do their fair share of the work, which also mimics the endless variety of hold shapes and sizes you'll encounter when climbing. If your hands, fingers, and forearms are completely healthy, putty is perfect for improving muscular endurance.

It also can be great for recovering from injuries if you're at the right stage in the post-injury period—when you have no more pain and inflammation but feel weak or unstable when you climb. Just two weeks of these exercises can make a world of difference for your climbing.

## Start Here

Whether you just want stronger hands and fingers or want to get back on the wall after an injury, pick a light putty and go first for endurance. You will notice that it fatigues your hands fast. The goal is to strengthen your muscles or overcome your injury in a safe environment. For injuries that are normally tested by first dangling off a hangboard, this is a good intermediate step. The idea is that if you have to take time off while a finger problem heals, even two weeks of recovery can cause moderate atrophy of the forearm, finger, and hand muscles, not to mention a general weakening throughout your entire body. Starting with the lightest putty (we recommend Cando Theraputty, [massagewarehouse.com](http://massagewarehouse.com)), aim for two weeks of doing 10 minutes of exercises a day. If you're completely healthy, feel free to start with a denser putty, but still aim for 10 minutes a day. This will strengthen your hands as well as balance out the muscle tone missing from time off due to injury. Whether you're starting with the lightest putty post-injury or starting with an intermediate putty for overall improvement, always make sure to warm it up before using it. With post-injury work, let pain and inflammation be your guide. If your injury puffs up or swells, you did too much. If pain occurs but does not persist, or gets better as you do the work, you are usually OK. When in doubt, ask your doctor or back down to a lower-resistance putty.

## PUTTY HAND GAMES

- 1 **Warm Up:** Always start by warming the putty up by kneading it with both hands, squeezing with each finger individually and together, pressing in, and pushing out (fig. 1).
- 2 **Can Opener Twists:** Roll your putty up into a log and try to twist the top off (fig. 2). Do this 15 times working left, 15 times working right, and then switch hands. Once you can do 15 times each way easily, aim for 1.5 minutes for each direction. If that's too easy, grab denser putty. This one is pretty basic, but it's excellent for new climbers and anyone with wrist injuries.
- 3 **Ball Explosions:** Ball up the putty and push your fingers into it, working to open them in two ways: starting with bent fingers (fig. 3) or straight fingers (fig. 4) and then expanding them. This works muscle groups on the back of your forearm, the extensors and the abductors.
- 4 **Roll Squashes:** Twist the putty into a long torpedo shape, then pinch it flat between the thumb and each finger (fig. 5). Remake it into that log shape and pinch it flat between the thumb and each finger again. Pay attention to which fingers fatigue faster than the rest. Focus on making those digits stronger. Getting any muscle shake? That's great. This means the muscles are learning and getting healthily fatigued, and this is the best time to teach proper movement patterns.
- 5 **Crimp Pinches:** Make a torpedo again, but bigger than before, about  $\frac{1}{2}$ " to  $\frac{3}{4}$ " in diameter. Place it across your fingers' last crease, just under the tip with palm up. Now roll your fingers over to squeeze the tube against the base of your fingers (fig. 6).
- 6 **Web Squeezes:** Roll it into a long tube and hold it so it's hanging straight down. With the other hand palm down, squeeze the putty with the webbing of your fingers, working the whole way down the putty (fig. 7). Reshape and move to the next finger. Do a second round with a fatter tube.

fig. 1



fig. 2



## PUTTY HAND EXERCISES

fig. 3



fig. 4



fig. 5



fig. 7



fig. 6



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## Goals of Putty Use

- Strengthens the smaller muscles of the hand (lumbrical and interossei muscles) in a safe and focused environment that reduces the possibility of injury.
- Focuses on your weaknesses, like correcting muscle imbalances, increasing strength and end range of motion, and improving overall range of motion.
- Decreases forearm and finger fatigue; a targeted way to gain more endurance in muscles that are often overlooked while climbing.
- Increases and improves finger-joint stability and biomechanics, including decreasing the risk of harmful abnormal motion during climbing due to wrist fatigue and weakness.
- Safe beginning for loading joints on pinches or crimps, particularly post-injury.
- Healthy transition from full rest to climbing; reduces risk of re-injury or prolonging current problems.
- Great way for beginner and intermediate climbers to strengthen fingers to prepare for more intense hangboard or systems board training.

## Doctor's Note

Any lasting pain? You need to do more rehab before climbing on it. Fatigue but no pain? Good. Keep going. Continuously roll and pinch the putty, working all the fingers and aiming for about 1.5 minutes per exercise. This will give you stamina and strength.