

Weak hands, weak body? Millennials lose grips

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If you need help using the latest smartphone app, ask a Millennial. If you need help opening a jar, you might want to turn elsewhere.

Young adults in the United States are losing their grips, a recent study suggests. Researchers tested 237 of them and found that men ages 20 to 34 and women in their early 20s had significantly weaker hand grips than young people tested in 1985. Women in their late 20s were weaker in their right, but not left, hands.



The findings, published in the [Journal of Hand Therapy](#), prompted some headlines about Millennials having wimpy handshakes. That's probably not a real concern, says researcher Elizabeth Fain, an assistant professor of occupational therapy at Winston-Salem State University in North Carolina. The young people she tested had enough strength to manage a firm shake, she says. "It's not like we shake hands with our full grips," she says.

A bigger concern, she and other experts say, is that the hand grip findings — if confirmed by larger studies — could be a sign of more general flabbiness in a generation that does more texting and clicking than manual labor.

"The fact that you have a weak grip is important because you probably are weak elsewhere," says Richard Bohannon, a physical therapist and a professor of health studies at Campbell University in Buies Creek, N.C. "It's a window into your world. ... It provides a peek behind the curtain at your health status."

Links between grip strength and overall health and vitality are especially strong in [later years](#), Bohannon says. Older adults with weak grips are more likely to become disabled or die sooner, he says. When paired with other signs — such as slow walking or trouble standing up from a chair — a weak grip is a reliable sign of overall frailty in old age, he says.

And [one large study](#) found that men with weak grips at midlife, ages 45 to 68, were more likely than men with strong grips to be disabled 25 years later.

It's harder to say what a weak grip in a young adult might portend.

Grip strength is not consistently linked with overall strength in studies of athletes and fit young people, says Peter Ronai, a clinical associate professor of exercise science at Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, Conn. But, he says, it's quite plausible that sedentary living has contributed to declines in both overall strength and hand strength in many young adults.

In 2014, just 29% of U.S. adults ages 18 to 44 regularly engaged in strength-building exercises, such as weight lifting, push-ups and pull-ups, according to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#). The CDC recommends such activities at least twice a week for adults of all ages.

Unless Millennials start working on their strength, in their hands and elsewhere, they may well enter old age with too little in reserve, Fain says. Everyday tasks, such as carrying grocery bags and lifting cooking pots, could get harder sooner, she says.

A weak grip also could be an immediate problem for some young people, Ronai says. "There are jobs where it's extremely important to have adequate grip strength," including firefighting, police work and some manufacturing jobs, he says. And sports from rock-climbing to tennis and golf require a strong grip.

Improving your grip will not make you stronger elsewhere or increase your lifespan. But it will help you open those jars — or carry a stretcher or turn a wrench. Here are some things Ronai says may help strengthen the 30 or so muscles in the hands and forearms involved in a good grip:

- **Squeeze on a handball or tennis ball** (an exercise that some people also like for stress relief).
- **Get a hand-gripping exercise device.** There are several versions, including [simple grippers](#) with two handles separated by a spring. Push the handles together and hold to build endurance.
- **With hand weights or dumbbells,** perform [seated wrist curls](#). Sitting with your forearms resting on your thighs and your palms up, use your wrists to curl the weight toward your body. Repeat with palms down.

A rule of thumb for strength-training exercises: go for two to four sets of 10 to 12 repetitions, choosing a weight or level of resistance that lets you complete each set in good form, with some effort, but without pain. If you can do 15 repetitions, increase the weight or resistance.