

The Real Role of Thumb in the Overall Function of Hand

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15354/si.25.pe265>

Funding: No funding source declared.

COI: The author declares no competing interest.

AI Declaration: The author affirms that artificial intelligence did not contribute to the process of preparing the work.

The human thumb is a uniquely evolved anatomical structure that plays a disproportionately significant role in the overall function of the hand. While often taken for granted, the thumb's opposability, mobility, and strength make it indispensable for grasp, manipulation, and precision tasks that distinguish human dexterity from other primates and animals. This perspective article examines the biomechanical, evolutionary, neurological, and functional significance of the thumb in hand activity. Beyond simple gripping, the thumb contributes to balance, stability, and refined motion in both gross and fine motor skills. It enables power grips essential for labor, sports, and survival, as well as precision grips vital for writing, surgery, and art. The discussion also considers the thumb's role in neural representation, rehabilitation, and prosthetics, highlighting its irreplaceability in daily life. Ultimately, the thumb is not merely one of five digits but the cornerstone of human hand function, underpinning culture, technology, and survival.

Keywords: Thumb; Hand; Functionality; Technology; Ubiquity

Science Insights, September 30, 2025; Vol. 47, No. 3, pp.1963-1966.

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THE HUMAN hand is a marvel of biological engineering, enabling activities ranging from brute strength to delicate artistry. Yet, within this complicated framework, the thumb occupies a special place. Anatomists, anthropologists, and clinicians alike have long emphasized the importance of the thumb, often noting that losing it renders the hand nearly useless (Li & Goitz, 2003). The opposable thumb, capable of touching each of the other fingers, is not merely an anatomical curiosity but a functional necessity. It would be extremely difficult to write, grip tools, button a shirt, or even hold a cup without it (Flatt, 2002). Its significance lies in a combination of evolution-

ary history, biomechanical design, neurological emphasis, and cultural meaning, making it central to human life.

From an evolutionary perspective, the opposable thumb is one of the defining traits of the primate lineage, and its refinement in humans is unparalleled (Ladd, 2018). Some primates such as chimpanzees and gorillas possess opposable thumbs, but the degree of independence and range of movement is greatest in humans (Agarwal et al., 2024). This trait gave early hominins a decisive advantage. Archaeological evidence suggests that species like *Homo habilis* and *Homo erectus* developed advanced gripping abilities around two million years ago, which

enabled them to craft and wield stone tools (Dennell & Hurcombe, 2024). These skills transformed survival strategies, supporting hunting, food preparation, and eventually cultural innovations. The thumb's saddle-shaped carpometacarpal joint and specialized musculature provided the stability and flexibility needed to hold, shape, and manipulate objects (Colmers-Gray et al., 2025). More than an anatomical adaptation, the thumb became a cornerstone of civilization itself, allowing humans to shape their environment and express symbolic thought.

Anatomically, the thumb differs from the other digits in crucial ways. It has only two phalanges instead of three, and it articulates at robust joints that allow flexion, extension, abduction, adduction, and rotation (Nanayakkara et al., 2017). The carpometacarpal joint at its base creates the unique possibility of opposition, the motion that allows the thumb to cross the palm and touch the tips of the other fingers (Andrés et al., 2022). This capacity for opposition is the secret behind human dexterity. A complex interplay of muscles, both intrinsic and extrinsic, contributes to its movement. The thenar muscles, including the opponens pollicis, abductor pollicis brevis, and flexor pollicis brevis, provide fine control, while extrinsic muscles such as flexor pollicis longus and extensor pollicis longus provide strength and stability (Acosta & Varacallo, 2019). Biomechanically, the thumb accounts for nearly half of the functional capacity of the hand. Studies have shown that losing the thumb can reduce hand efficiency by up to sixty percent, illustrating its disproportionate importance compared to the other four fingers (Nanayakkara et al., 2017; Quaine et al., 2010).

This anatomical foundation translates into critical functional roles. The thumb is indispensable in power grips, where the fingers wrap around an object while the thumb provides counterpressure. Tasks such as lifting a suitcase, holding a hammer, or gripping a sports racquet rely on this mechanism (Ladd, 2018). Without the thumb, the hand would lack the clamping ability needed to secure heavy or awkward objects. Equally important is its contribution to precision grips, where the thumb opposes the index and middle fingers to manipulate small items. Writing, sewing, threading a needle, or performing surgery all rely on this capacity (Quaine et al., 2010). The thumb's ability to modulate pressure with extraordinary precision allows humans to perform delicate operations that no other species can achieve. Beyond grasping, the thumb provides balance and stability in countless tasks. Even in actions where it does not directly pinch, such as writing, the thumb acts as a stabilizer that ensures controlled motion (Kivell, 2021).

The role of the thumb extends beyond mechanics into communication and expression. In many cultures, the simple gesture of raising or lowering the thumb indicates approval or disapproval (Marquardt et al., 2014). In Roman times, the fate of gladiators was signaled by the crowd's thumbs. In modern times, the "thumbs up" gesture has become a universal sign of agreement or positivity, further reinforced by its symbolic use in digital culture. In sign language, the thumb forms essential shapes that are part of the expressive vocabulary of the deaf community (Alshomrani et al., 2021). Thus, the thumb functions both as a tool and as a medium of human expression.

The neurological representation of the thumb in the brain further underscores its importance. In the somatosensory and

motor cortices, the thumb occupies a disproportionately large area, reflecting its complex motor control and tactile sensitivity (Olafsdottir et al., 2004). The thumb pad is densely packed with mechanoreceptors that allow humans to discriminate textures, temperatures, and subtle differences in pressure. The brain's motor circuits prioritize thumb movement, and in individuals who rely heavily on thumb activity—such as musicians, surgeons, or craftspeople—cortical maps often expand to accommodate enhanced function (Harris & Jong, 2014). This neuroplasticity demonstrates the centrality of the thumb in learning, coordination, and skill development. In rehabilitation following injury or stroke, restoring thumb function is often a primary goal, as it represents the gateway to regaining independence in daily activities.

The clinical importance of the thumb becomes painfully clear when it is injured or diseased. Conditions such as arthritis of the carpometacarpal joint, traumatic injuries, congenital deformities, or neurological impairments can severely limit thumb function, leading to major disability (Lerebours et al., 2020). Reconstructive surgical techniques prioritize thumb preservation or creation. Procedures such as pollicization, where another finger is surgically transformed into a thumb, demonstrate the extraordinary lengths to which surgeons will go to restore its function (Lerebours et al., 2020). In prosthetic design, replicating thumb opposition remains a central challenge. Modern myoelectric prostheses attempt to simulate thumb function because without it, artificial hands lack practical utility (Muzaffar et al., 2005). Rehabilitation strategies emphasize strengthening the thenar muscles, improving range of motion, and regaining oppositional control, all in recognition of the thumb's unique role.

The thumb is equally central in ordinary human life and culture. In infancy, thumb-sucking serves as both a comfort mechanism and an early exploration of body awareness. In adulthood, the thumb is involved in virtually every occupation, whether it is farming, cooking, construction, or delicate fields like neurosurgery (Kivell, 2021). Leisure activities such as playing the piano, gaming, or even scrolling through a smartphone rely heavily on thumb use. In fact, modern technology has redefined the daily workload of the thumb. Smartphones and handheld devices require constant thumb motion, leading to new repetitive strain conditions such as "texting thumb" or "gamer's thumb (Ming et al., 2006)." Far from diminishing its importance, technology has elevated the thumb to a primary interface between human anatomy and digital culture.

Looking toward the future, the thumb still motivates research and innovation. Evolutionary studies of thumb morphology across human populations and fossil records shed light on adaptation and survival strategies (Basnet et al., 2015). Robotics and artificial intelligence strive to design artificial thumbs capable of replicating human dexterity, an endeavor that continues to test engineering limits (Shafti et al., 2021). Advances in regenerative medicine raise the possibility of restoring thumb function through tissue engineering, stem cells, and neural integration. As long as humanity seeks to replicate or enhance hand function, the thumb will remain the focal point of both inquiry and innovation.

The real function of the thumb in hand extends far beyond being one digit among five. It enables survival-oriented power

grips and civilization-defining precision tasks. It is the evolutionary trait that made tool use possible, the biomechanical anchor of stability, the neurological centerpiece of tactile sensation, and the cultural icon of expression. To lose the thumb is to lose

the essence of the hand itself. Recognizing its significance allows us to protect its health, advance its rehabilitation, and appreciate its foundational role in the human story. ■

Received: May 10, 2025 | Revised: July 08, 2025 | Accepted: August 16, 2025

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