



British Shoulder & Elbow Society

Helpsheet: Shoulder Pain

THE SHOULDER IS THE MOST MOBILE JOINT IN THE BODY. THE MAIN SHOULDER JOINT IS A BALL-AND-SOCKET JOINT, WHICH ALLOWS A VERY WIDE RANGE OF MOVEMENT. A GROUP OF FOUR MUSCLES AND THEIR TENDONS MAKE UP THE ROTATOR CUFF, WHICH CONTROLS MOVEMENT AND ALSO HELPS TO HOLD THE JOINT TOGETHER.

What causes shoulder pain?

There are many causes of shoulder pain, but the most common cause is related to the rotator cuff. These muscles have to work with every activity involving the arm. Sometimes due to overuse, a change in activity or just normal age related changes these muscles don't do their job as well. This can result in pain.

The good news is that if you have shoulder pain that has come on gradually or without any history of injury then simple exercises that help these muscles work better could improve your pain.

What are the symptoms?

- Pain around the front and/or side of the shoulder.
- Pain made worse by movement, e.g. raising arm above shoulder level or putting on a coat. Some people will complain of pain at night, particularly when lying on the affected side.

Diagnosing shoulder pain and when to see a doctor or physiotherapist

There are many causes of shoulder pain but generally, as long as you haven't had a history of a

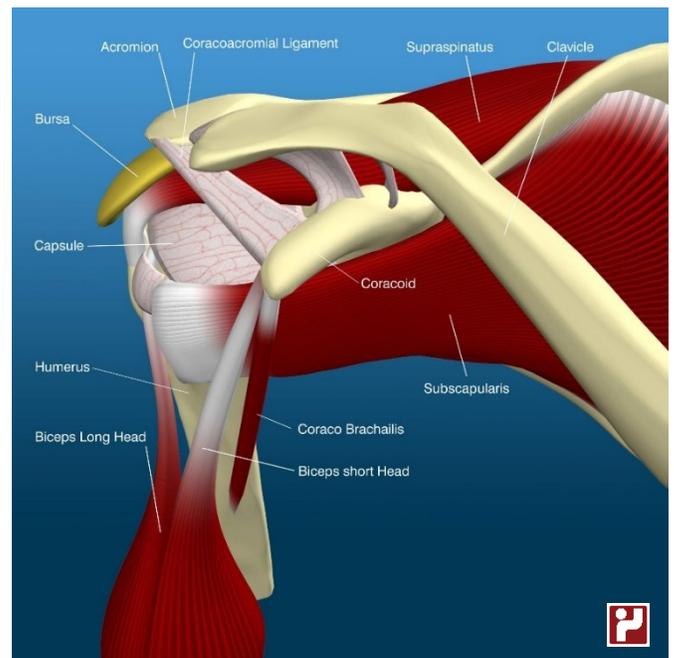


Figure 1: Anatomy of the shoulder joint

fall or injury most shoulder pain responds well to exercises that make the rotator cuff muscles stronger. Half of all first-time episodes of shoulder pain improve within 6 weeks with simple exercises and sometimes painkillers without any additional treatment from a doctor or physiotherapist.

X-rays and other investigations are **not** usually necessary during the first episode of pain. They are only indicated if your pain doesn't improve despite following the advice and exercises recommended below.

You should see a doctor or physiotherapist for urgent advice if any of the following applies to you:

- If you have had an injury to your shoulder that has caused pain and weakness or difficulty with lifting your arm up.
- You have noticed any unusual lump or swelling around the neck, shoulder or arm.
- You have warm red skin in the region of pain, have a fever or are feeling generally unwell since your shoulder pain started.
- You have had an injury to your shoulder that has led to your shoulder having a different appearance or shape.
- You have pain that is getting worse or not improving despite taking painkillers and doing the recommended exercises, or your pain is so severe that it prevents you from doing the exercises.

How is it treated?

The good news is that there are several things you can do that can help reduce your pain and aid your recovery.

Changing how you move

The first thing to do is to break the pain cycle. While it is important to alter or reduce the activities that make your pain worse especially those over shoulder height, you must **not** stop using your arm. Muscles need some activity to keep them healthy. Try reaching for things with your thumb or your palm uppermost (figure 2).



Figure 2: How to reach for things with your thumb or palm upwards

Sleep position

Sometimes when the tissues in your shoulder are sore they are more sensitive if they are compressed for a long time such as when you lie on your shoulder. To help your pain settle it can sometimes be helpful to avoid lying on your painful shoulder for prolonged periods until it feels better. Putting a rolled-up towel behind your back can help to stop you rolling on it at night. You could also try using a pillow to rest your arm on so that its weight is supported when you sleep.

Medications

Painkillers and anti-inflammatory medications may be prescribed by your GP if your pain is constant and you are struggling to sleep. These are usually just required as a short-term measure to control pain that has recently developed. Some people need to continue with painkillers to help manage more long-term conditions.

Exercise

Exercise is the most effective way of helping your shoulder recover. Some simple exercises are suggested at the end of this leaflet. Most people will start to see an improvement in their symptoms within 6 weeks of starting the exercises so keep going

Injection

Steroid injections can be used to reduce inflammation when pain is severe and constant and sleep is affected. However, it is still important to follow the exercise and activity modification advice.

Physiotherapy

Sometimes people do not get better despite persisting with the exercises for 6-12 weeks. They may need a little extra help especially if they have joint stiffness, neck pain or other factors that make it difficult to do the exercises. Treatment with a physiotherapist may be needed.

Remember the most important part of treatment is your home exercise programme and modifying how you do things.

Recommended exercises

Good movement habits

Pain can influence your posture however you can try the following exercise to improve your posture. Imagine a balloon attached to the top of your head. Imagine it is filled with helium gas and is pulling you up. Feel how this straightens your back and widens your chest.

This reduces the load on your shoulder and can help you move more efficiently.



Figure 3: Adjusting your posture

Key Points

The following exercises should be done within your own comfort. When you start them you may find that you can only move a small distance without pain but this will improve. A little bit of discomfort won't do any damage but pain should **not** increase while you are doing the exercises.

The number of repetitions that are recommended is what you should aim for but it may take a few attempts to build up to this.

Wall slides

Find a smooth wall or wall mirror and a cloth that will slide easily on the wall. Alternatively put socks on your hands. Stand facing the wall. Place the edges of your hands against the wall with your thumbs facing you.



Figure 4: Wall slides

Now step forward as you gently push into the wall and gently slide your hands up the wall as far as you can. Relax and return to start position gently pulling your elbows back to your side (figure 4).

Repeat eight times twice daily.

Push-ups against the wall

Now put your hands on the wall as if you are going to do a pushup. Make sure your hands are placed a little wider than the width of your shoulders.. Make sure your hands are turned out slightly.

Now lower your body towards the wall keeping your body nice and tall. When you start make sure your elbows are below your shoulders (figure 5).

Repeat eight times twice daily.



Figure 5: Push ups against the wall

Upper Body Rotation

When you have shoulder pain it is not uncommon to get stiff in your upper back. Sit on a chair and fold your arms across your chest. Sit up tall and turn as far as you can away from your shoulder (figure 5).

Repeat eight times each direction twice a day.

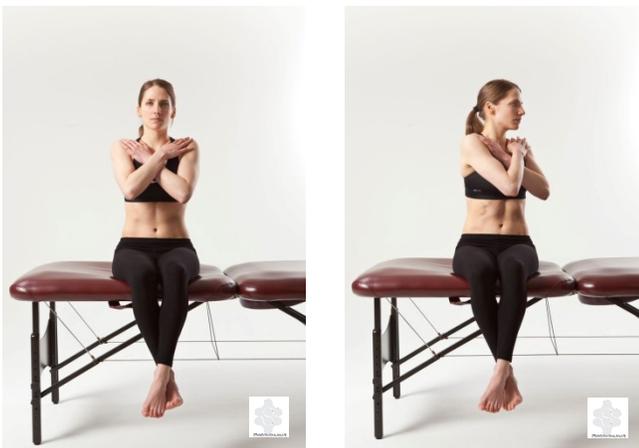


Figure 6: Upper body rotation

Remember you are in control of your shoulder and changing the way you move and doing the recommended exercises can help you to get better. It may be 6 -12 weeks before you see a big change in your pain so stick with it.

Good luck!

British Shoulder & Elbow Society - February 2017

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