

Rotator Cuff Issues



Rotator Cuff issues are common in sports/recreation and with everyday activities. There are four muscles that make up the rotator cuff: infraspinatus, supraspinatus, subscapularis and teres minor. Three of the four muscles originate on the back of our scapula (shoulder blade) and the fourth on the front of the scapula. Through their attachments, they form a "cuff" around the shoulder joint. Their main function is to keep the head of the humerus stabilized "ball in the socket" in order for proper motion/mechanics to occur in the shoulder. Injury is most common in the tendons, which attach the muscles to bone. Tendons naturally have a poor supply compared to muscle/bone and are more prone to injury.

Symptoms: Pain is most common and can be in various regions of shoulder (front/side/back) along with pain radiating into the neck or down the arm to elbow or even the hand. There can also be "pins and needles" sensation if muscular trigger points are involved. Limited shoulder motion and weakness are common, especially resisting or pushing out to the side. Pain may subside with rest and be present only with activity or when trying to sleep.

Causes: Injury to the rotator cuff can be traumatic or atraumatic. Traumatic usually involves a fall on that arm or attempting to lift something heavy. Most issues have no specific cause and are due more to gradual "wear and tear" of the tissues. This can be due to repetitive use of the arm/shoulder, weakness to shoulder musculature, decreased flexibility, poor posture and in the case of sports/recreation, poor technique with playing.

Self-Care: Although I know it is hard to do, not playing for a period of time while your symptoms subside is recommended. You can perform various stretches in flexibility is an issue along with rotator cuff strengthening exercises. You can use ice on the shoulder region (20 minutes max, multiple times per day) and take over the counter medication such as anti-inflammatories, pain medication if you choose. If related to sport, making sure you are performing proper technique is beneficial.

Physical Therapy: Physical Therapy should start with a comprehensive evaluation to determine the cause of your symptoms. In the case of shoulder/arm pain, the cervical spine (neck) can be an origin and needs to be ruled out. Once this is determined, treatment may consist of using LASER, therapeutic ultrasound and/or electrical stimulation to decrease pain, inflammation and promote soft tissue healing. Other treatment may consist of manual therapy techniques, including soft tissue mobilization, trigger point release and joint mobilizations to improve shoulder mobility. Specific stretching, strengthening exercises may also be included along with therapeutic (kinesio) taping and instruction in self-care/home management.

Recovery Time Frame: Many factors can determine recovery time including duration of treatment before receiving treatment, age and other medical conditions. Allowing three to six weeks is a general guideline for non-surgical condition, but could be more or less depending on the above mentioned factors along with sticking to any treatment plan.

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