

## DISEASES & CONDITIONS

# Common Shoulder Injuries

Each year, millions of people of all ages go to the doctor for shoulder problems, including inflammation, sprains and strains, arthritis, impingement, and fractures.

Shoulder injuries are frequently caused by athletic activities that involve excessive, repetitive, overhead motion, such as swimming, tennis, pitching, and weightlifting. Injuries can also occur during everyday household activities such as washing walls, hanging curtains, and gardening.

## Warning Signs of a Shoulder Injury

If you are experiencing pain in your shoulder, ask yourself these questions:

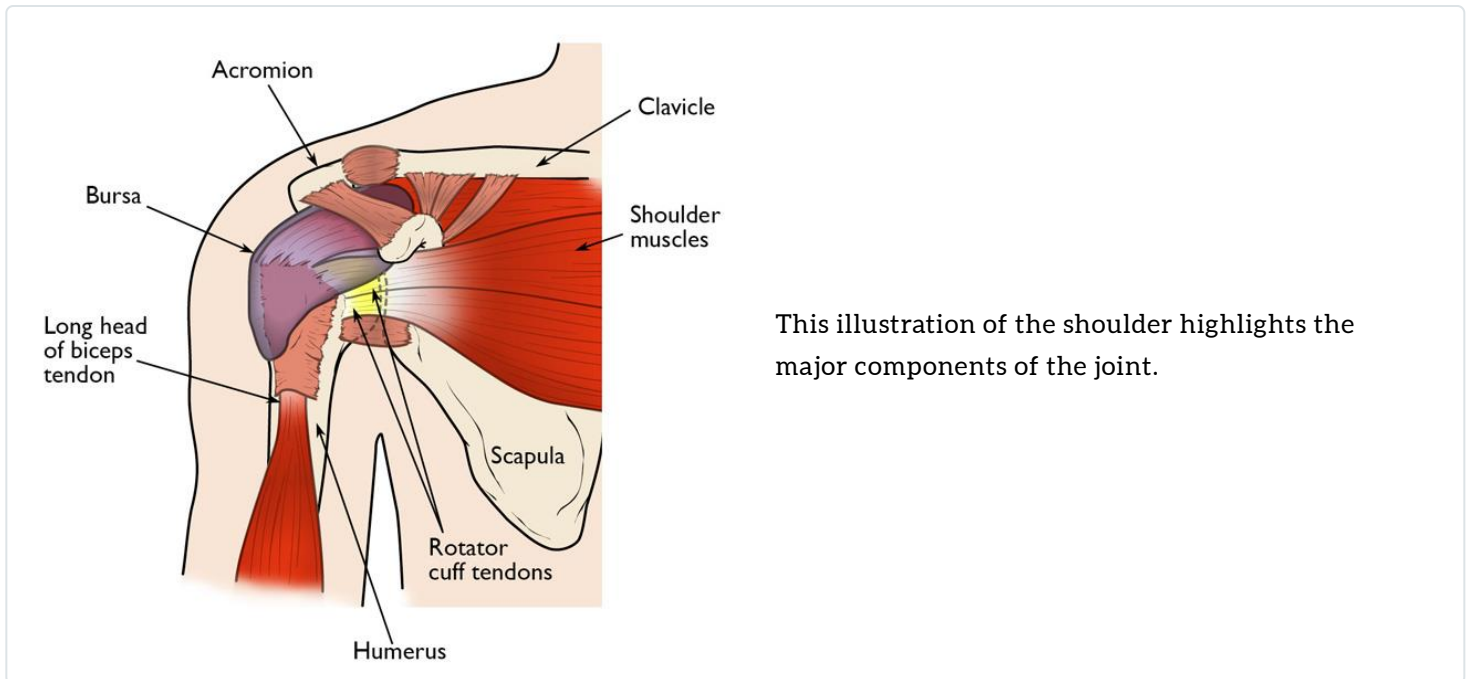
- Is my shoulder stiff? Can I rotate my arm in all the normal positions?
- Does it feel like my shoulder could pop out or slide out of the socket?
- Do I lack the strength in my shoulder to carry out my daily activities?

If you answered "yes" to any one of these questions, you should consult an orthopaedic surgeon for help in determining the severity of the problem.

## Common Shoulder Injuries

Most problems in the shoulder involve the muscles, ligaments, and tendons, rather than the bones. Sometimes, a person will suffer a fracture, or break, of the humerus (arm bone) or glenoid (shoulder socket) that involves the [bones of the shoulder\(/en/diseases--conditions/shoulder-trauma-fractures-and-dislocations/\)](https://orthoinfo.aaos.org/en/diseases--conditions/shoulder-trauma-fractures-and-dislocations/).

Athletes are especially at risk for shoulder problems. In athletes, shoulder problems can develop slowly through repetitive and intensive training routines that put stress on the various soft tissue structures (ligaments, tendons, and muscles) of the shoulder.



This illustration of the shoulder highlights the major components of the joint.

While it may be normal to feel sore or have slight aches and pains after strenuous (demanding) or repetitive activity of the shoulder, some people may underestimate (misjudge) the extent of their injury. It is important to be able to tell the difference between normal soreness and pain. Steady pain, weakness in the arm, or limitation of joint motion will become almost second nature to some people, leading them to not seek treatment. However, ignoring the pain and “playing through” a shoulder injury only aggravates the condition and may possibly cause more problems.

In general, a good rule to follow is that any discomfort that does not improve with a period of rest, icing, and [anti-inflammatory medications\(/en/treatment/what-are-nsaids/\)](#) may be a sign of a more serious injury – and a reason to see a shoulder specialist.

Orthopaedic surgeons group shoulder problems into the following categories.

## ***Instability***

The shoulder joint is a ball-on-socket joint. It can become unstable if the ball wants to fall off the socket due to being “loose-jointed” or an injury to the shoulder. This condition is called [instability \(/en/diseases--conditions/chronic-shoulder-instability/\)](#), and it can result in a dislocation of one of the joints in the shoulder. People with instability may experience pain with moving their arm or avoid motions that make the shoulder feel like it wants to slip out of place.

## ***Impingement***

[Impingement\(/en/diseases--conditions/shoulder-impingementrotator-cuff-tendinitis/\)](#) is caused by excessive rubbing of the shoulder muscles against the parts of the shoulder blade called the acromion and coracoid.

Impingement problems can occur during activities that require excessive overhead arm motion. Seek medical care immediately for inflammation in the shoulder because it could eventually lead to a more serious injury. Repetitive rubbing of the muscles against the bone can lead to [tendinitis](#) ([/en/diseases--conditions/shoulder-impingementrotator-cuff-tendinitis/](#)), which is a form of inflammation, and even possibly lead to tears that may require surgery in the future.

## ***Stiffness***

Shoulders that sustain an injury may become stiff. This type of injury may lead to a condition called adhesive capsulitis, or [frozen shoulder](#) ([/en/diseases--conditions/frozen-shoulder/](#)).

If there are no tears to the structures of the shoulder after an injury, it is important to avoid long periods of immobilization in a sling *and* to start physical therapy to prevent a frozen shoulder from developing. This can be a very painful and prolonged injury.

## **Rotator Cuff Injuries**

The rotator cuff is one of the most important components of the shoulder. It is made up of a group of muscles and tendons that hold the bones of the shoulder joint together. The rotator cuff muscles provide you with the ability to lift your arm and reach overhead.

A rotator cuff injury may occur from a direct trauma or from wear and tear over time, as it is a normal part of aging.

When the rotator cuff is injured, people sometimes do not recover the full shoulder function needed to properly participate in an athletic activity. They may also have pain, loss of motion, or weakness that do not improve with non-surgical treatments.

Learn more: [Rotator Cuff Tears](#) ([/en/diseases--conditions/rotator-cuff-tears/](#))

## **Treatment of Shoulder Injuries**

Early detection is the key to preventing serious shoulder injuries.

### ***Shoulder Exercises***

Many injuries can be safely treated without the need for surgery. Often, an orthopaedic surgeon will prescribe a series of exercises aimed at strengthening the shoulder muscles. A common home exercise program can be used in addition to a formal supervised physical therapy program.

Here are some easy shoulder exercises that you can do to strengthen your shoulder muscles and prevent injuries.

### **Basic shoulder strengthening**

Attach elastic tubing to a doorknob at home. Gently pull the elastic tubing toward your body. Hold for a count of 5. Repeat 5 times with each arm. Perform twice (2 times) a day.

### **Wall push-ups**

Stand facing a wall with your hands on the wall and your feet shoulder-width apart. Slowly perform a push-up. Hold for a count of 5. Repeat 5 times. Perform twice (2 times) a day.

### **Shoulder press-ups**

Sit upright in a chair with armrest, with your feet touching the floor. Use your arms to slowly rise off the chair. Hold for a count of 5. Repeat 5 times. Perform twice (2 times) a day.

See more conditioning exercises: [Rotator Cuff and Shoulder Conditioning Program\\*](#)  
(/en/recovery/rotator-cuff-and-shoulder-conditioning-program/)

## ***Other Treatment***

Your doctor may prescribe [nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs \(NSAIDs\)](#)(/en/treatment/what-are-nsaids/), such as ibuprofen and naproxen, to reduce pain and swelling.

If there is no improvement with medications and/or physical therapy, your doctor may recommend a corticosteroid injection into one of the joints of the shoulder to provide temporary relief of pain, inflammation, and swelling. This may allow you to better participate in your daily activities and engage in a physical therapy program that has been shown to be very effective for your shoulder injury.

Only when patients do not improve with these options will a surgeon perform a more detailed evaluation with advanced imaging and discuss a surgical procedure (if you are a good candidate for surgery).

Surgery is individualized based on:

- The specific condition
- The patient's age
- The desired goals for activity; for instance, do you want to be able to play a sport again, or are you just hoping to be able to do everyday activities without pain and discomfort

*\*These exercises should be done under the supervision of a doctor or physical therapist. Not all of these exercises may be recommended for every patient, and the number of repetitions and sets for each exercise may vary.*

**Last Reviewed**

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