

# Rotator Cuff

## What is a Rotator Cuff –

The shoulder is a very complex joint because it is able to move in all directions. This allows you to swim, lift, reach, climb and even scratch behind your back. No other joint in the body has this much movement. This is where your rotator cuff comes in. Your rotator cuff is a group of four muscles that support the shoulder. In particular, these muscles help to keep the ball of your shoulder in the socket throughout movement. A rotator cuff injury is injury or altered function (commonly weakness) to one of these muscles.

Here are 4 common injuries of the rotator cuff as well as related to rotator cuff:

- Rotator cuff tear
- Rotator cuff tendinosis
- Shoulder bursitis
- Shoulder impingement

## Symptoms –

Depending on your particular injury, you may have some or all of the following symptoms:

- Pain with overhead shoulder movements. E.g. reaching into a high cupboard, washing your hair, hanging the washing on an overhead clothes line
- Pain with shoulder movements reaching behind you. E.g. reaching into the back seat of your car, putting your hand behind your back to tuck in your shirt or scratch your back, doing up your bra, putting on your jacket
- Pain with repetitive tasks. E.g washing windows/car, pruning in the garden
- Pain lying on the affected shoulder
- Pain in the neck radiating to the shoulder, near the shoulder blade or down the arm
- Weakness in the shoulder/arm. E.g. weakness with lifting groceries, chopping veggies, holding the hair dryer while drying your hair
- Ache in the shoulder or down the arm, sometimes even while resting

## Treatment -

All of the above issues are reversible injuries that can be improved with hands on treatment, exercise and the right advice. It has been reported that 75% of patients with full thickness rotator cuff tears can make a full recovery with physiotherapy alone.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> \*J Kuhn, R Wright Effectiveness of physical therapy in treating atraumatic full-thickness rotator cuff tears: a multicenter prospective cohort study. Journal of Shoulder and Elbow Surgery. Oct 2013

It is important to see your physiotherapist sooner rather than later for pain relieving hands on treatment, exercises to starting doing at home, and advice to avoid further injury.

In the mean time, if you suspect or have a scan confirming rotator cuff injury, it can help to follow the next 3 steps:

### **1. Modify or cease any activity that causes you discomfort**

Rotator cuff injuries are very common. Here are a 2 activities that are commonly painful, and ways in which you can modify them.

- Putting your bra on behind your back is commonly painful with rotator cuff injury. Try putting your bra on at the front and then swiveling it around to avoid putting your hand behind your back.
- Hanging out the washing on an overhead clothes line. Try hanging your washing on a clothes horse.

Some activities are virtually impossible to modify so that they are pain free. In these instances, it is best to avoid them until you see your healthcare provider. Common examples are washing windows, washing the car, reaching into the back seat of a car.

### **2. Keep objects close to your body and between waist and shoulder height**

To reduce aggravating your injury or making it worse, keep objects between shoulder and waist height. This position allows for other muscles in your shoulder to do the majority of the work, thereby protecting your rotator cuff. Here are 2 examples

- Holding grocery bags by your sides can be painful. Try holding your bags in front of you, hugging/cradling them to your tummy (think of cradling a baby)
- Stirring a saucepan on the back burner can become painful. Move the pot to the closest burner to you so you are not over-reaching

### **3. Avoid sleeping on your affected shoulder**

Even if your shoulder is not preventing you from sleeping on your affected side just yet, it is best to avoid it until you get an assessment. Sleeping on the affected shoulder can quickly escalate your pain and worsen your symptoms in certain rotator cuff injuries.

Our physios are trained in assessing and treating rotator cuff injuries. Your physio will work with you aiming to get you back to doing all activities you were participating in pre-injury.

As mentioned above, your shoulder is a very complex joint allowing for a wonderful range of movement. If you only look at your shoulder as a ball and socket joint, it is unlikely that you will make a full recovery. Treating your shoulder blade and neck, as well as the actual shoulder joint can play an important role to fully address your problem and prevent reoccurrence. Therefore, your physio treatment may be around your shoulder, shoulder blade, lower neck and upper arm.

Treatment techniques can include:

- Massage, trigger point therapy, myofascial techniques
- Acupuncture / dry needling
- Cupping
- Ultrasound treatment
- Stretching and strengthening exercises
- Taping to support the shoulder joint or shoulder blade
- Home Program to return to previous activities / sport and prevent reoccurrence
- Advice on how long it will take to make a full recovery and how you can get there
- Specific guidance to your situation.

While your physio is trained to assess and treat rotator cuff injuries, in some cases surgery may be necessary. If you are not recovering as expected, your physio will refer you for further assessment.



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