



Rotator Cuff Tendinopathy

What is it?

The rotator cuff refers to a group of four small muscles which run from the shoulder blade to the top of the arm bone. They support and move the shoulder joint. The rotator cuff muscles attach to the top of your arm bone by tendons. Rotator cuff tendinopathy refers to irritation of one or more of these tendons with or without a tear. It was previously thought the problem was primarily due to inflammation of the tendon but research has shown the collagen which makes up the repairing tendon is weaker and not as well organised and as such is prone to reinjury and pain. Often these tendons can be pressed against the bone at the top of the shoulder joint which is called impingement. As people age, it is normal for the rotator cuff tendons to wear and deteriorate, however only a small proportion of people develop pain and weakness that requires treatment.

Symptoms?

Rotator cuff tendinopathy results in pain felt in the upper arm. It is usually felt when you try and lift your arm and typically develops gradually. Sudden onset of pain and immediate loss of movement following an injury can indicate a large cuff tear and you should seek advice as soon as possible. You may also experience stiffness in the shoulder. Pain is also common at night, often radiating down the arm. Pain may worsen over time in intensity and frequency.

What causes it?

- Injury, especially while trying to lift or catch a heavy object
- Age
- Poor blood supply to an area of the rotator cuff (which occurs with increasing age)
- A fall on an outstretched arm
- A gradual weakening of the tendons of the shoulder

What can you do?

- Ice following participation in sport or aggravating activity (10 minutes)
- Don't ignore the problem if you have significant pain or loss of movement, it generally won't get better on its own if the cause is not addressed and you continue to aggravate your symptoms
- Exercise assists in keeping your shoulder strong and flexible and may reduce pain. There are some exercises shown on the next page for you to try. Providing the correct exercises for shoulder problems is often difficult, please read the instructions in the exercise section to ensure you have the best chance of improvement.
- Sometimes poor posture can cause shoulder pain, even if you do not have a significant problem with the rotator cuff, if you work at a computer remember your posture and take regular breaks.
- Painkillers and anti-inflammatory medications can assist to reduce pain and inflammation (Any medication that you take should be discussed with your GP or pharmacist)
- In some cases surgery may be required to repair the rotator cuff if it is completely torn, or to reduce pressure on the irritated tendons.

Can you prevent it?

- Avoid excessive, repetitive overhead activities
- Strengthen your shoulders and do not try to play or work through the pain
- Your physiotherapist will be able to assess and determine the cause of your rotator cuff tendinopathy and address this during your recovery to prevent re-occurrence, this will often include exercises to improve your posture.

Exercises

- The following exercises have been provided as they may help your symptoms if done regularly.
- They are not appropriate for everyone and remember to commence these exercises at a manageable level.
- The recommended time, repetitions and frequency of each exercise are intended as a guide that you may need to modify.
- It is normal to experience some muscle fatigue and generalised muscle soreness when doing a new exercise but you should not experience severe pain or acute exacerbation of your symptoms whilst doing them and particularly not for a prolonged period of time after the exercises.
- If you are not managing consult your GP.

The exercises are listed with the easiest ones first. Choose only 3 – 4 of the exercises shown. Start with the easiest and progress to the more difficult ones as you are able. It is very important that you do not allow your shoulder to stiffen and weaken but equally important that you are not provoking severe pain and this can be a difficult balance to achieve. As such work through the exercises sensibly, use medication and ice as required and speak with your GP if your symptoms are not improving although it can often take some time to improve.

Do the 3 – 4 exercises chosen as many times as recommended in the description of the exercise and do this 2 – 3 times per day.

NB: This leaflet is intended for general advice only and you should seek further assessment from your GP if your symptoms fail to improve.



Stand leaning on a table with one hand.

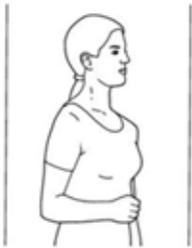
- Let your other arm hang relaxed straight down.
- Swing your arm forwards and backwards.
- Swing your arm left and then to your right.
- Swing your arm as if drawing a circle on the floor. Change direction.

Repeat 10 times in each direction.



Stand with your arm close to your side and your elbow at a right angle.

Push the palm of your hand against the other hand. Hold approx. 10 secs.
Repeat 10 times.



Stand with your back against the wall. Keep your upper arm close to the side and elbow at a right angle.

Push the elbow back against the wall. Hold 10 seconds.

Repeat 10 times.



Sit or stand. Keep upper arms close to the sides and elbows at right angles.

Turn forearms outwards.

Repeat 10 times.



Stand with arms behind your back. Grasp the wrist of the arm you want to exercise.

Slide your hands up/across the back, if your arm is too stiff or painful too reach hold a towel between your hands to stretch the arm.

Hold 10 seconds, 10 times, if this is going to help you should find lifting your arm is easier to do after this exercise.



Stand facing a wall.

'Walk' your fingers up the wall as high as possible. Reverse down in the same way, sometimes it is easier to push your arm down.

Repeat 10 times.



Stand facing a wall. Keep your upper arm close to the side with elbow at a right angle.

Push your fist against the wall. Hold for 10 seconds.

Repeat 10 times.



Stand with your upper arm close to your side, elbow at a right angle and the back of your hand against a wall.

Push the back of your hand against the wall. Hold approx. 10 secs.

Repeat 10 times.



Stand in a walking position. Bend your elbow and support the forearm against a door frame or corner.

Gently rotate your upper trunk away from the arm until the stretching can be felt in the chest muscles. If you feel significant pain, or pinching in your shoulder or upper arm, readjust your position so only a stretch is felt. Stretch approx. 20 secs, repeat 3 times.



Stand with your hips and knees slightly bent holding small tins of food or 1-2 kg weights in both hands.

Lift alternately (R) arm up and bring it back down and repeat on the (L) side.

Repeat 10 times.