



Ouch, My Shoulder Hurts?

Katie Foutch, PT, DPT
Physical Therapist
Andover Physical Therapy

One of the most common causes of shoulder pain in an adult is shoulder impingement. Impingement is caused by pressure placed on the rotator cuff from part of the shoulder blade as the arm is lifted.

The rotator cuff is a group of muscles comprised of the supraspinatus, infraspinatus, teres minor, and subscapularis. The rotator cuff covers the head of the humerus and helps to lift and rotate the shoulder.

The acromion is located at the front edge of the shoulder blade. As you lift the shoulder, the muscles of the rotator cuff rub up or impinge against the acromion and then cause pain and limited movement.

Impingement is common in young athletes and middle-aged people. Because young athletes use their arms for overhead activities such as baseball or swimming they are vulnerable to impingement. Individuals whose work activities include overhead construction or painting are susceptible. Pain also can develop from minor trauma or spontaneously.

Symptoms include minor pain present with activity and at rest. Pain at times radiates from the front of the shoulder to the side of the arm and also with lifting or reaching motions. As symptoms progress pain may happen at night and you may lose strength and motion.

Impingement is diagnosed through physical examination and review of symptoms by an orthopedic surgeon. X-ray and MRI can be used to further diagnosis fluid or inflammation of the bursa and a possible rotator cuff tear.

Treatment options include conservative and surgical. Conservative treatments include the use of anti-inflammatory medication, avoiding overhead activities, cortisone injection or physical therapy. Physical therapy uses specific exercises to improve shoulder strength and flexibility and therefore decreasing the pain. If conservative treatment does not relieve the pain then surgical treatment is the next option. The goal of surgery is to create more space for the rotator cuff to move. The common surgical technique is subacromial decompression or anterior acromioplasty. After surgery rehabilitation is needed to strengthen the rotator cuff and gain range of motion.

So get in to see your doctor or physical therapist right away because you don't want your shoulder pain to limit your everyday life.

