

Rotator Cuff Disorder

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What Is a Rotator Cuff Disorder?

The rotator cuff is a group of four muscles and tendons that help stabilize and move your shoulder. Rotator cuff disorders occur when these tissues become irritated, inflamed, weakened, or torn. Rotator cuff problems are one of the most common causes of shoulder pain.

Common Symptoms

- Pain and/or weakness in the shoulder or upper arm
- Pain with pushing, pulling, or overhead activities
- Pain when lying on the affected shoulder
- Stiffness or reduced shoulder movement
- Clicking, catching, or popping sensations
- Night pain that may interfere with sleep
- Symptoms may develop gradually from repetitive use or occur suddenly after an injury.

What Causes Rotator Cuff Problems?

- Repetitive overhead activities
- Heavy lifting
- Sports injuries
- Falls or trauma
- Age-related wear and tear
- Poor shoulder mechanics or posture

Rotator cuff problems can range from mild irritation of a tendon to a partial or complete tear.

How Is It Diagnosed?

Diagnosis begins with a review of your symptoms, medical history, and a physical examination.

If needed, imaging studies may be recommended:

- **Ultrasound** can evaluate tendon injuries.
- **MRI** can help determine the size and severity of a tear.

It is important to know that many people, especially older adults, may have rotator cuff tears on imaging without having any symptoms. Imaging results must always be considered along with your symptoms and examination findings.

Treatment

Many rotator cuff conditions improve without surgery. Treatment may include:

- Ice therapy
- Progressive strengthening exercises
- Manual therapy
- Joint mobilization when appropriate
- Home exercise programs

Other Treatment Options

Additional treatments may include:

- Over-the-counter pain relievers
- Anti-inflammatory medications
- Cortisone injections
- Surgery may be recommended for significant tears, persistent weakness, loss of function, or when conservative treatment does not provide adequate improvement.

Prognosis

Most cases of rotator cuff irritation and many partial tears respond well to conservative treatment. Recovery depends on factors such as age, activity level, severity of injury, and participation in rehabilitation.

Typical Duration of Care

Treatment varies based on the severity of the condition:

- Mild irritation or tendinopathy: 8–12 visits over 4–8 weeks
- Moderate tendinopathy or partial tears: 12–24 visits over 2–5 months
- Post-surgical rehabilitation: Often requires several months of supervised rehabilitation

When to Seek Medical Attention

Seek prompt medical care if you experience:

- Sudden loss of shoulder strength after an injury
- Inability to raise your arm
- Severe pain following trauma
- Significant swelling or deformity of the shoulder