

How to help your shoulder pain



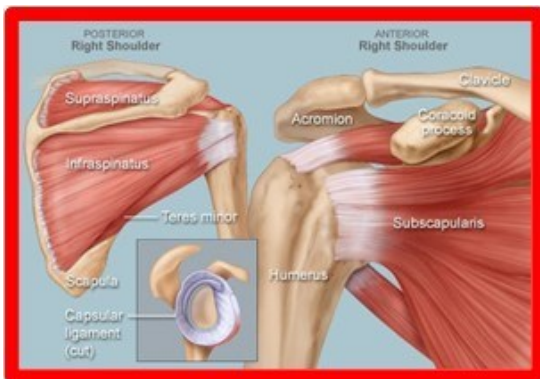
Cambridgeshire Community Services NHS Trust: delivering excellence in musculo-skeletal services and pelvic health physiotherapy across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough

This guidance has been produced by the DynamicHealth physiotherapy service. It offers simple measures to help you manage your shoulder problem safely; often the right advice and exercises are all you need to improve the problem. This leaflet has been made available to your GP, who may ask you to try the advice and exercises prior to consulting a physiotherapist.

If your shoulder pain started after recent trauma, please seek medical advice before reading further.

About the shoulder

The shoulder is the most mobile joint in the body and actually made of two joints. The main shoulder joint is a ball and socket, which allows a wide range of movement. The joint is surrounded by a tough fibrous sleeve called the capsule, made of muscles, tendons and ligaments, which helps to support the joint. A group of four muscles and their tendons make up the rotator cuff, which controls movement and also helps to support the joint.



Causes of shoulder pain

There are many causes of shoulder pain, but most of these only affect a small area and improve quickly.

There are several other possible causes of shoulder pain, such as:

- inflammation or damage to the muscles and tendons around the shoulder
- tension in the muscles between the neck and shoulder – this is typically down to your posture in your upper back or neck and is often linked to the way you stand or sit when you're at work or using a computer
- inflammation in the bursae, which normally help the muscles and tendons slide smoothly over the shoulder bones
- damage to the bones and cartilage, which can be caused by arthritis.

It's also possible the pain you're feeling in your shoulder is coming from a problem in another part of your body, such as your neck. Problems in your neck can make your shoulder blade or upper outer arm painful, when this happens it's known as referred pain. If you're feeling a tingling sensation in your hand or arm, as well as pain.

Shoulder exercises

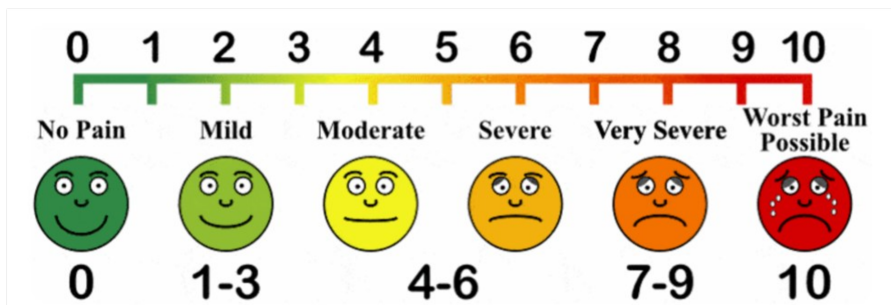
How much should I do?

- **Exercise every other day** – allowing enough rest is important to let the soft tissues recover and develop.
- **Choose 3 or 4 exercises** from the set below that are challenging but manageable.
- **Perform 3–5 sets of 5 repetitions** of each exercise.
- **Rest for up to 1–2 minutes** between each set.
- **Once an exercise is easy, progress it** by increasing the number of repetitions (aim for 10) or for holding the positions for longer, or moving to a more challenging exercise.

The following exercises do not need to be completed in any particular order and it can be helpful to try and gradually build your range of movement and strength at the same time. Choosing some challenging but manageable exercises from each section may be helpful.

How much pain is too much?

- **Before exercising, rate your pain** at that moment on a scale of 0–10, where 0 is no pain and 10 is the worst pain you can imagine.
- **A maximum pain level of 4/10 while exercising is fine**, as long as this eases within 45 minutes of the session and does not interfere with sleep or activities the next day.
- **If your pain increases beyond this, simplify the exercise** by reducing the range of movement or number of repetitions, or try an easier exercise.



Range of movement exercises

If your shoulder has lost movement because of pain or stiffness, it needs to be regained in order to strengthen the shoulder effectively.



Shoulder pendulums

Stand leaning on a table with your good arm. Let your other arm hang relaxed straight down. Gently swing your arm as if drawing a circle on the floor (the bigger the circle, the harder). Change direction. Aim for up to 30 seconds each way.



Table slides

Sit or stand. Place your hands on a table. Slide your hands along the table as far as you can without lifting your shoulders very much.



Assisted arm raise in supine

Lie on your back. Use your good arm to lift the other arm up over your head. Then slowly relax back to the starting position.



Assisted shoulder external rotation stretch

Lie, sit or stand with both elbows at right angles. Hold a stick with both hands. Keep your elbow near to your side as you use the stick and other hand to push the hand of the affected side outwards; your elbows should stay bent throughout.



Shoulder blade squeezes

Standing or sitting. Gently squeeze your shoulder blades back together to feel a gentle squeeze of the muscles between your shoulder blades and relax. Try not to lift your shoulders up at the same time.



Shoulder stick-assisted abduction stretch

Stand and grip one end of a stick with the arm to be exercised. Lift your arm to the side, assist by pushing with the other hand. Then slowly relax back to the starting position. repeat.

Strength exercises

If your shoulder moves through its full range of movement in the previous exercises, please try some of these strengthening exercises.



Shoulder flexion without weight

Stand up straight with arms by your sides. Lift one arm forward and up with the thumb leading the movement. Lower the arm back to the starting position.



Shoulder flexion with weight shift

Stand with one leg forward, your weight on the rear leg. Loop a band, knotted scarf/towel or looped belt around your hands. Move your weight towards your front leg. At the same time, bring your arms forwards and upwards while keeping the band tight. Keep your neck and shoulders relaxed. Bring the weight back to the rear leg and lower your arms to your side. Switch legs and repeat.



Wall slide and lift-off

Stand tall, facing a wall. Forearms against the wall with palms facing each other. Keep a neutral spine position – don't arch your back. Lean towards the wall while sliding your arms upwards into a 'Y' position. Let your shoulder blades 'push outwards' and keep your shoulders down. At the 'Y' position, lift your arms slightly off the wall. Lower to the starting position.



Wall push-ups

Stand facing a wall with your arms straight and hands on the wall. Do push-ups against the wall, keeping your body in a straight line. Your elbows should be at a comfortable height during this exercise; aim for your trunk and upper arms to form an arrow shape rather than a T-shape.



Bent-over row without weight

Stand leaning on a table with one hand. Let your other arm hang relaxed straight down. Bend your elbow bringing it behind your back and pull your shoulder blades together. Hold a light weight in your hand to increase the difficulty.



Eccentric shoulder external rotation

Sit diagonally by a table. Bend your elbow and place it on the table. The elbow should be slightly in front of the body and slightly lower than your shoulder. Hold a weight in your hand with your hand pointing straight up. Keeping the elbow and shoulder in place, in a controlled manner, lower the hand forward. Return to the starting position using support from your other hand.

Top tips

- Try to build your exercises into your daily activities.
- You don't have to do all the exercises in one go.
- Don't feel you have to replicate the full movement of the exercise straight away. Use it as a guide, and build up gradually to the full movement over time.
- If a particular movement is painful, monitor your progress each week by seeing how this movement improves.
- It is normal for it to take **6–12 weeks** before you notice an improvement in your pain, movement and strength, and it can take longer for complete improvement.
- Don't stop moving your shoulder – muscles need movement to keep them healthy.
- General exercise can really help your recovery so try to keep going with other activities you enjoy to keep fit. Even a brisk walk could really help.

Avoid unhelpful postures

The best posture is the next posture – it is a good idea to take regular breaks from sitting or standing in the same position for a long time. When you do need to sit for a while, try to avoid leaning forward with your arm held tightly by your side, which is a common “guarding” position in shoulder pain. Unfortunately, it can make the problem worse, especially if some of the pain is coming from your neck. Sitting tall and supporting your arm on a cushion on your lap may be a helpful alternative.

Reducing the strain

While the shoulder is at its most painful, there are ways of adapting your movements to reduce the strain you place on it. For example, when raising your arm or lifting objects, try to reduce the strain on your shoulder by keeping your elbow bent and in front of your body (rather than out to the side). It's often more comfortable to keep your palm facing the ceiling too. To lower your arm, bend your elbow, bringing your hand closer to your body.

Try to avoid or limit movements that are most painful, especially those that involve prolonged positions or pushing into an end range of movement. Movements that are typically most aggravating are those that hold your arm away from your body, above shoulder height or behind your back. It is nonetheless important to remain active, even if you have to limit how much you do or the types of activity you do. We encourage you, as pain allows, to try and restore full movements but gradually as you feel able.

Lifestyle and Wellbeing Support Services

<https://haycambspboro.co.uk/>

<https://healthyyou.org.uk/>

Speaking to the social prescriber at your GP practice can also be a very useful resource

Useful Resources

<https://www.versusarthritis.org/media/23100/shoulder-pain-information-booklet.pdf>

For further information about this service contact:

General Enquiries: 0300 555 0123

Physiotherapy Dept, Hinchingsbrooke Hospital, Hinchingsbrooke Park, Huntingdon, Cambs PE29 6NT

Physiotherapy Dept, Brookfields Campus, 351 Mill Road, Cambridge, CB1 3DF

Physiotherapy Dept, Princess of Wales Hospital, Lynn Road, Ely, Cambs, CB6 1DN

Physiotherapy Dept, Doddington Hospital, Benwick Road, Doddington, Cambs, PE15 0UG

Physiotherapy Dept, Rowan Lodge, North Cambs Hospital, The Park, Wisbech, Cambs, PE13 3AB

Physiotherapy Dept, City Care Centre, Thorpe Road, Peterborough, PE3 6DB

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