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Adhesive Capsulitis
“Frozen Shoulder”

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Adhesive Capsulitis

**Definition**
Adhesive capsulitis, commonly referred to as a frozen shoulder, is an orthopedic condition of the shoulder characterized by pain and stiffness of the shoulder causing limited movements overhead and often behind the head and back. Affecting nearly two percent of the general population yearly, adhesive capsulitis often begins as a result of an injury/immobilization leading to a lack of movement because of pain. However, a frozen shoulder can occur without cause, usually referred to as idiopathic frozen shoulder. Rarely seen in people less than 40 years age, women seem to have a greater incidence of a frozen shoulder than men, with 70% of the diagnosed cases of adhesive capsulitis being women ages 40-60. In addition to female gender, people that have diabetes, heart disease, thyroid disorders, Parkinson’s disease, or rheumatoid arthritis are at greater risk of developing a frozen shoulder as compared to the general population.

**Anatomy**
The lack of movement involved with a frozen shoulder is a result of “adhesions” in the shoulder joint capsule. The shoulder joint is made up of the humerus in your arm and the clavicle (collar bone) and scapula (shoulder blade) in the upper shoulder region. These bones of the shoulder are held together and supported by the shoulder joint capsule. When adhesions form in the joint capsule tissue, the tight bands of tissue limit movement of the joint and cause the natural space between your scapula and humerus to become narrower. The inside of the joint capsule contains synovial fluid that lubricates the joint and provides nutrients to the joint. Because of the lack of mobility to move the fluid around, the joint is less lubricated and further impairs mobility.

**Signs and Symptoms**
While the signs and symptoms of adhesive capsulitis may vary, the hallmark sign of this condition is usually shoulder stiffness, causing problems lifting the arm overhead and behind the head and back. In most cases, the stiffness in the shoulder is characterized by a physical limitation in the movement of the shoulder. For example, typically your active range of motion that you can produce independently is about the same as the motion that can be produced passively. Therefore, regardless if the shoulder is moved independently or if something or someone else moves the joint, the motion is the same because there are physical adhesions in the joint limiting mobility. Physicians have also developed three stages of a frozen shoulder (freezing, frozen, thawing), beginning with increased stiffness and pain and ending with return of shoulder function. Other signs and symptoms of a frozen shoulder include increased stiffness and pain at night, dull and/or aching pain in the upper arm and shoulder, and increased pain with movement, a symptom that typically makes the stiffness in the shoulder worse over time.

**Treatment**
While recovery from a frozen shoulder can take up to 12 months, 95% of all cases are successfully treated. Orthopedic surgeons can use surgical manipulation to treat adhesive capsulitis. However, most physicians will utilize medications, steroid injections, and physical therapy to restore lost mobility. Upon your first visit to physical therapy, the therapist will examine the shoulder, measuring your active range of motion, passive range of motion, and strength. Using the examination findings, your physical therapist will develop a treatment program that may include but is not limited to moist heat, stretching exercises, strengthening exercises, electric stimulation, manual stretching, and/or ice. The physical therapist will give you exercises to complete at home, which is essential in a successful outcome. In fact, the leading cause of failed recovery from a frozen shoulder is non-compliance with exercise/stretching prescription.

**Physical Therapy**
Visit your primary care physician, who can give you options for further care for adhesive capsulitis. If you and your primary care physician decide to try physical therapy, your physical therapist will perform an evaluation and establish an exercise program that is appropriate for you.