Sullivan Center Rehabilitation

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Rotator Cuff Tendonitis

Definition

“My shoulder started hurting 3 months ago, and I don’t know why.” There are many causes of shoulder pain in adults. Let’s examine one of the most common causes of shoulder pain for adults over the age of 40—the rotator cuff. A great majority of adults who have shoulder pain may have problems with their rotator cuff. The rotator cuff is the most important group of muscles in your shoulder. Let’s take a closer look at the rotator cuff; what it is, how it’s injured, what you do for an injury, and how you prevent injury.

Anatomy

The rotator cuff is a group of 4 small muscles that live on your shoulder blade. They connect your shoulder blade to your arm with tendons (all muscles are connected to bone by a tendon). The tendons form a cuff around your shoulder like a cuff on a shirt sleeve. These small muscles act together to rotate the head of your arm. They steer your shoulder in the right position as your bigger arm and chest muscles work as the engine to lift your arm. The rotator cuff muscles are the steering wheel for your shoulder.

Causes

As we age, our rotator cuff naturally wears out from years of lifting, pulling, and pushing with our arms. After 40 years of use the tendons get thinner and are more likely to become injured. Typically the injury begins from too much activity with your arms overhead or from lifting heavy objects you’re not used to lifting. This strains the tendons and they become inflamed—we call this tendonitis. You can also injure the tendons by falling onto your outstretched arm. The tendons are thin and do not have a good blood supply, therefore they don’t heal well when they’re injured. Repeated strains of your rotator cuff will likely tear the tendons over time.

Diagnosis

When you have rotator cuff tendonitis, you’ll have pain when using your arm for normal activities. Lifting your arm over your head (with simple activity like dressing and combing your hair) and reaching out to the side will cause pain. The pain will often radiate down your arm into the forearm and wrist. Usually a torn rotator cuff will cause pain not only with active use of your arm, like tendonitis, but the pain will be present all the time (especially at night). Tendonitis pain may get better and go away. A torn rotator cuff will not get better and will probably worsen.

Treatment

Shoulder pain that doesn’t improve with time needs to be evaluated by an orthopaedic physician. An orthopaedist will examine your shoulder to determine the cause of the pain. If rotator cuff tendonitis is causing the pain, the orthopaedist will likely refer you to physical therapy. The physical therapist will evaluate your shoulder and design a program to restore your mobility and strength. Most cases of rotator cuff tendonitis will respond to physical therapy, and you’ll be able to return to pain-free use of your shoulder. If the rotator cuff tendonitis doesn’t respond to treatment, your orthopaedist will likely order an MRI. This will tell them if you have a torn rotator cuff. If your rotator cuff is badly torn, the orthopaedist will likely recommend surgery to repair the tear as torn tendons do not heal themselves. After surgery, physical therapy will be prescribed and it will be several months before you’ll use your shoulder.

Prevention

The best medicine is always prevention. There are several things you may do to protect your rotator cuff as you age. Avoid heavy repetitive overhead lifting activity. If you’re going to begin a fitness program, be sure to have a well-trained instructor show you safe shoulder exercises. Gradually begin any new arm activity, and don’t overdo it. You may ask your physician to refer you to a physical therapist for instruction in a home exercise program to keep your rotator cuff muscles strong. If you feel a strain on your shoulders at any time stop the activity. Shoulder pain is very common as we age. However, rotator cuff problems are not the only reason you’ll experience shoulder pain. The best thing to do if you have persistent shoulder pain is see your physician.