REBALANCEMD

Acute Shoulder Injuries

A Guide to Early Recovery

About Your Injury

Shoulder injuries are common. A sudden (acute) injury can happen from sudden & forceful movements, falls, or direct blows to the shoulder. Pain, bruising, or swelling may appear within minutes of the injury, or may not develop until later that day or the next day.

Shoulder injuries may involve the joints (shoulder dislocation or AC separation), rotator cuff tendons (tears), other surrounding muscles, nerves or fractures of the bones. Shoulder pain can also be related to overuse injuries like tendinopathy and bursitis, or a flare up of arthritis.

Protecting Your Shoulder

You may be given a sling for comfort. After an acute shoulder injury or dislocation, gradually reduce use of the sling as your pain improves, aiming to stop using the sling within 1–3 weeks. Several times a day, remove your arm from the sling to gently move and stretch your elbow and wrist. Continue using the sling beyond 3 weeks only if specifically advised.

If there is no fracture (broken bone) around the shoulder, you may safely use the shoulder for activities of daily living as tolerated. It may be uncomfortable to use, but it is not causing any damage to the shoulder joint.

Rest First, Then Begin Gentle Movement

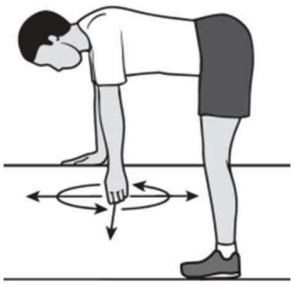
For the first couple of days after your injury, rest your shoulder and avoid excessive movements that provoke pain.

You should begin gentle exercises to get the shoulder's full range of motion back as soon as possible. Regaining full motion is one of the most important parts of recovery. Keep your shoulder moving within comfortable limits. Not using your arm at all can make the shoulder become stiff.

As your shoulder recovers, gradually increase your activity. Continue to avoid activities that make your shoulder pain or swelling worse afterward. Range-of-motion exercises may cause some discomfort, but they will not damage the shoulder. When your pain is under control and your range-of-motion is improving, you may progress to basic strengthening exercises.

Pendulum

Lean forward placing one arm on a counter or table. Let your affected arm hang freely at your side. Gently swing the arm forward and back 10 times. Repeat moving side-to-side. Repeat in a circular motion.



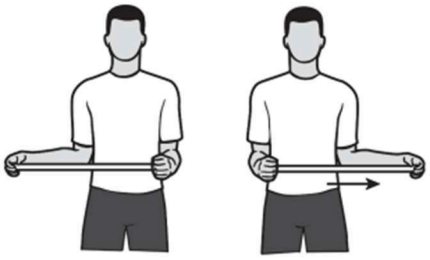
Assisted Shoulder Flexion

Sitting or standing, walk your hand up a wall or door using your fingers. Use your other arm to support under the elbow if needed. Walk up the wall as high as tolerated. Hold the top position for 5-10s then slowly lower. Repeat 10 times.



Assisted External Rotation

Grasp a stick or pole with one hand and cup the other end of the stick with the affected sides hand. Keeping the affected side elbow at your side, push the stick horizontally to the point of feeling a pull. Hold for 5-10 seconds and repeat 10 times.



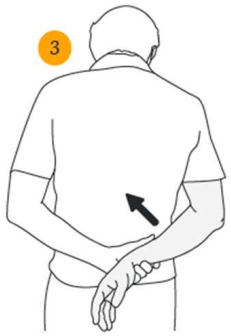
Passive Assisted Adduction

Use the unaffected arm to stretch the sore arm across the chest, stretching out the back of the shoulder. Hold for 15-30s and repeat 2-3 times.



Passive Assisted Internal Rotation

Use the unaffected arm to stretch the sore arm behind the back. Try to bring your arm up as high as tolerable. You may find it helpful to bend forward while doing this. Hold the position for 5-10s and repeat 10 times.



Recovery Strategies

Ice

Apply ice for 10–20 minutes at a time, as often as every 2–3 hours, to help control pain and swelling. Wrap ice in a cloth or towel to protect your skin. Avoid heat for the first 3–4 weeks after an acute injury.

Sleep

After a shoulder injury, finding a comfortable sleeping position can be hard. Many patients find an upright sleeping posture, propped up with pillows or even resting in a recliner chair is most comfortable.

Pain Control

Over-the-counter medications can help control pain:

- Acetaminophen (Tylenol) may be used up to 4 times a day for pain.
- Anti-inflammatory medication such as ibuprofen (Advil) or naproxen (Aleve) may be added, if you do not have a history of heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, kidney problems, or stomach ulcers.
- Topical diclofenac gel (Voltaren) may also be helpful if you prefer a topical option.

Check with your doctor or pharmacist if you are unsure whether these medications are right for you.

Physiotherapy

Physiotherapy is very helpful for recovering from a shoulder injury and can typically begin a few days after your injury. Physiotherapists are trained in the assessment and recovery of acute shoulder injuries. Contact a physiotherapy clinic near you to book an assessment — your physiotherapist will guide you through a program tailored to your specific injury and recovery.