

Rotator Cuff Tear

Non-surgical treatment

This handout is for patients with a rotator cuff tear. It explains your treatment choices and what you can do to improve your shoulder.

What is a rotator cuff tear?

The *rotator cuff* is a group of muscles and cords called *tendons* around your shoulder joint. When 1 or more of these tendons tears, the tendon no longer fully attaches to the head of the bone. A rotator cuff tear may happen suddenly due to an *acute* injury, or may slowly occur over time.

A rotator cuff injury can cause pain and weakness in the shoulder. This may get worse when using the arm away from the body.

How is it treated?

Treatment is important, because the tear can get worse and your muscles can get weaker. You may also have other problems, such as a bone spur or shoulder stiffness, that should be treated.

If your tear occurred suddenly, you may need surgery. But if the tears to your rotator cuff have happened over time, surgery may not be the best treatment. You may not have enough good tissue for the surgery to be successful.

Instead, your provider will prescribe *rehabilitation*. Rest, medicines, and exercise will be used to restore function to your shoulder. The goals of rehabilitation are to:

- Lessen your pain
- Increase your muscle strength so you can use your arm better



A rotator cuff tear causes pain and weakness in your shoulder.

Resting Your Shoulder

Every time you use your shoulder, the torn ligaments are irritated. This causes symptoms of *inflammation*: pain, heat, and swelling. The torn tendon cannot repair itself if it is inflamed.

Resting your shoulder for a while will lessen both pain and inflammation. Hopefully, it will also help your tendon heal.

Exercises to Strengthen Your Shoulder

Muscles in your shoulder help you raise, lower, and rotate your arm. To fully use your shoulder again, you must strengthen these muscles.

Your muscles may have weakened if you have not been able to fully use your arm. The exercises in this handout will give you the best chance of regaining good use of your shoulder. Your progress depends on how hard you can work your muscles without causing more injury.

Exercise 1

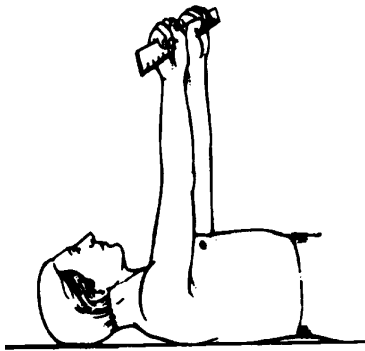
1. Lie on your back on a firm surface.
2. Hold a stick or cane with your hands close together, resting on your chest.
3. Raise your arms, slowly pushing the stick up toward the ceiling.
4. Keep pushing, so you lift your entire shoulder off the bed or floor at the end of each push.
5. Lower your arms and push up again.

Work up to doing 20 pushes, 5 times a day.

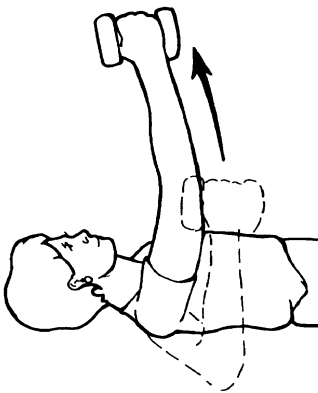
When you can do this easily 20 times, separate your hands about an inch. This makes your muscles work harder. As it gets easier, separate your hands more, until you can push your weak arm toward the ceiling by itself. Then do the same exercise using a washcloth. Because the washcloth is not rigid, your weaker side has to work harder. Then, slowly work on raising only your weak arm 20 times with nothing in your hand.

Exercise 2

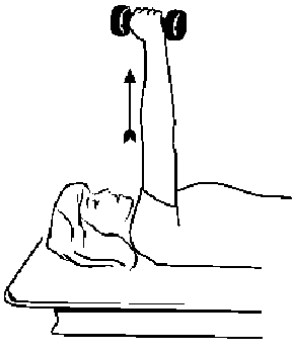
1. Take an empty plastic container that will hold 2 cups of water. Hold it with the hand of your weak shoulder.
2. Lie on your back on a firm surface. Raise your arm, lifting the container up toward the ceiling.



Exercise 1 (Step 4)



Exercise 2

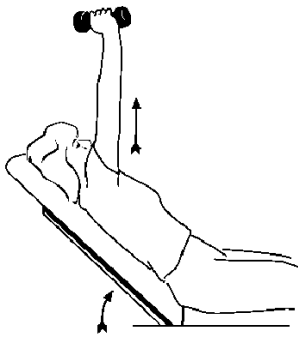


3. To increase the weight, add a small amount of water at a time. This puts resistance against your shoulder muscles to build their strength. When full, the container weighs about a pound.
4. Be sure to lift your shoulder blade off the bed or floor at the end of each push.

Do this exercise until you can do it comfortably 20 times, 5 times a day.

Exercise 3

This exercise is like exercise 2, but your body is in a different position.



Exercise 3

1. Prop your back up slightly with pillows or a reclining chair. An adjustable garden chair may work well.
2. Push up the same way, holding the full container with your weak shoulder hand.
3. Remember to push up all the way, so your shoulder blade lifts.
4. When you can do this comfortably 20 times, raise your back up higher.

Slowly increase your back height, until you are sitting upright and can push up the 1 pound weight 20 times.

Exercise 4

The final step is to do this upward push exercise, with the filled water container, 20 times while you are standing.



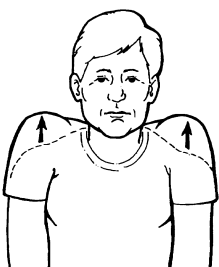
Exercise 4

More Shoulder Exercises

As your shoulder improves, you can move on to more strengthening exercises. Talk with your physical therapist about which of these you can start doing every day.

Shoulder Shrugging

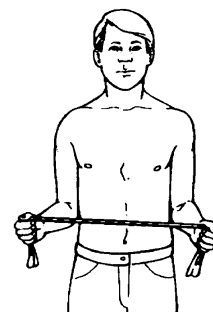
Standing and with your arm at your side, hold some weight. Lift and slowly lower your shoulder. This strengthens the *trapezius* muscles, which run across the back of your neck and shoulder.



Shoulder shrugging

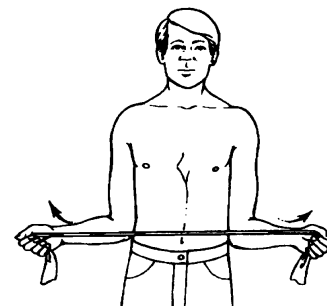
Shoulder Rotation

In these exercises, use a piece of rubber tubing. Stretching it strengthens the rotator cuff muscles that rotate your arm in. These muscles help hold your shoulder in place as well as rotating and lifting it overhead.



External Rotation

1. With your elbows bent at a right angle, grasp the tubing in your hands, with your hands about a foot apart.
2. Holding your good arm straight out, rotate your weak shoulder outward, stretching the tubing.
3. Hold 3 seconds and slowly relax.

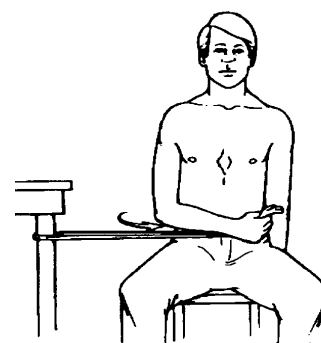
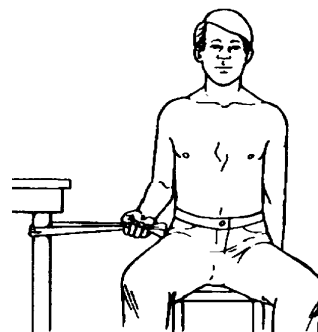


External rotation

Start by doing the exercise 5 times and work up to 20 times, 5 times each day.

Internal Rotation

1. Anchor the rubber tubing to a solid object.
2. Sit or stand with your weak arm at your side and the elbow bent at a right angle.
3. Rotate your arm inward across your stomach, stretching the tubing.
4. Hold 3 seconds and slowly relax.



Internal rotation

Start by doing the exercise 5 times. Work up to 20 times, 5 times each day.

Questions?

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or healthcare provider if you have questions or concerns.

Bone and Joint Center:
206.598.4288

Other Activities

These activities will strengthen your shoulder and improve your coordination and general well-being: swimming, using light resistance on a rowing machine, using a cross-country ski machine, and brisk walking.