

Shouldering the Pain?

Don't let shoulder problems tear you down

Second only to knee pain in the number of referrals to orthopaedic specialists, shoulder pain is nothing to shrug off.

“Shoulder problems are a common cause of pain and disability in the adult population,” says St. Joseph Medical Center orthopaedic surgeon Dr. Frank Catanzariti. “Particularly for people over age 40.”

While some shoulder problems are the result of other underlying conditions or illnesses, the most prevalent problems are the result of repetitive-motion activities or injury and affect the shoulder's rotator cuff, leading to either tears or tendonitis.

Rotator cuffs are made up of four muscles and their tendons, and are located in the rounded part of your shoulder, forming a “cuff” over the upper end of the arm. The rotator cuff helps to lift and rotate the arm and to stabilize the ball of the shoulder within the joint.

“Tendonitis occurs when the rotator cuff becomes irritated or inflamed,” says Catanzariti. “We also call this ‘impingement syndrome,’ which describes the pinching that happens when the space in between the top of the humerus, or arm bone, and the tip of the shoulder, or the acromion, becomes too narrow for normal motion.”

In some people with this problem, the shape of their bones is such that they have less space than is normal to begin with. In others, there is an initial injury that sets off the process of inflammation.

The most common symptoms of shoulder tendonitis include pain with overhead activities, pain while sleeping at night and pain over the outside of the shoulder and upper arm.

Rotator cuff tears have symptoms similar to tendonitis, but also include symptoms such as moderate to severe weakness, stiffness and loss of motion, and a “popping” or “crackling” sensation, which may follow an injury.

Rotator cuff tears in many cases are the next progression of shoulder tendonitis, says St. Joseph orthopaedic surgeon Dr. Bruce Wolock. “A tear occurs when the tendonitis gets so severe that it wears a hole through the rotator cuff tendon,” he explains.

Since the tendon is what connects the rotator cuff muscle to your humerus bone, when the tendon is torn, you experience weakness in the shoulder.

“Often, these tears happen in people who have had chronic shoulder pain,” says Wolock. “But tears also are common among people who do a lot of overhead work and athletes such as swimmers, pitchers and tennis players.” Tears can also occur with fractures or dislocations.

Symptoms of a tear may happen gradually or immediately, depending on the causes. You may feel pain in the front of your shoulder that radiates down the side of your arm. At first, pain may be mild and only happening with overhead activities.

“Over time, the pain may become noticeable with rest or with no activity at all,” says Wolock.

The good news is that, in most cases, shoulder tears and tendonitis can be treated conservatively through rest and limited activity, anti-inflammatory medication or steroids, the use of a sling, or with strengthening exercises and physical therapy.

In cases of severe rotator cuff tears that don't respond to medication or strengthening tactics, surgery may be recommended.

"The type of surgery performed depends on the size, shape and location of the tear," says Wolock. "In many cases, shoulder tears can be surgically treated through minimally invasive techniques."

For more information about shoulder pain or for referral to an orthopaedic surgeon, please call the **St. Joseph Medical Center Doctors Directory at 410-337.1337.**