

Rotator Cuff Tear

The problem

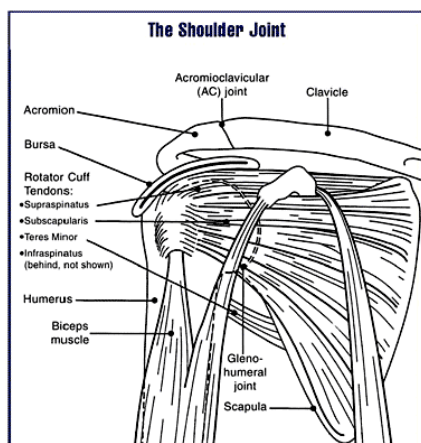
- A tear in the stabilising muscle(s) around the shoulder joint
- May be traumatic (usually younger people) or degenerative (usually older)
- Classified as full or partial thickness tears. This is only diagnosed by ultrasound or MRI investigations

Interesting facts

- In a 2005 cadaveric study of 306 bodies 51% had a cuff tear.
- Many rotator cuff tears cause no pain nor produce any symptoms.
- Partial and full thickness tears have been found in post mortem and MRI studies on people who do not have a history of shoulder pain or symptoms.
- Shoulder pain is variable and does not always correspond to the size of the tear.
- The vast majority of tears occur in the supraspinatus muscle
- Cuff tears become more prevalent with age, some say they are a 'normal' process of ageing.

What you can expect/look out for

- Pain – may be sudden onset or, more commonly, gradually developing over time
- Pain over the outside/front of the shoulder and can also pass down into the upper arm
- If pain has been present for some time, discomfort and/or tightness can also be felt in the neck
- Weakness in arm strength
- Loss of movement



Hints for self-management

- Avoid moving into painful positions, relative rest.
- Avoid loading the shoulder (lifting/carrying)
- Ice and sling during the early (acute) stages may be required
- Develop good shoulder and shoulder blade posture
- Use of NSAIDS as directed by your GP.

Management options

- Physiotherapy that includes both postural and specific muscle retraining/strengthening exercises
- Surgery may be indicated if the tear is large, there is an acute/traumatic onset or for any competitive overhead/throwing athlete.
- Physiotherapy is the preferred management for degenerative or chronic tears of the cuff.
- Cortisone injections may be considered alongside anti-inflammatory medication to settle the inflammatory reaction. Your GP will guide you with this.

More information

- <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/rotator-cuff-injury/DS00192>
- http://orthoinfo.aaos.org/topic.cfm?topic=A00406&return_link=0
- Williams GR. "Rotator cuff tears: why do we repair them?". *The Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery American* 2004 Volume 86-A (12): 2764–76.

This handout was prepared by **Sydney Sports and Orthopaedic Physiotherapy** and is intended as a general information service. Please note that the information provided is not intended as a substitute for advice from a registered physician or healthcare professional. If symptoms persist, please consult your doctor.

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