

Serving Up Shoulder Smarts

By Augustine Conduah, M.D.

It's the coveted secret weapon. A service that is so forceful, your opponent can't return it or keep it in the court. While serving an "ace" can put a smile on your face, the price for your prowess could be a persistent pain in your shoulder joint.

If you're experiencing a sharp pain in your shoulder or dull ache after serving, you're not alone. It's a common complaint among tennis players. The reason? Shoulder muscles are at their maximal flexion point during the overhead motion of a serve, an unnatural position that often pushes our shoulder joint to its physiological limits.

The part of the shoulder that is most commonly affected is the rotator cuff—a group of muscles and tendons that originate from the shoulder blade to the upper arm bone. In fact, the anatomical structure of the shoulder lends itself to injury from overuse. For instance, the repeated overhead extension and contraction of these shoulder muscles can cause fatigue and weakness that result in painful inflammation, irritation, tissue tears and bone spurs (calcium build ups).

Mild shoulder discomfort that only lasts a couple of days is nothing to worry about and can usually be alleviated with a little rest, ice and over the counter anti-inflammatory medication. But, if discomfort persists, don't wait to have it diagnosed. Most doctors can provide you with answers in one office visit by conducting a

simple physical exam and range of motion test that reproduces the symptoms you are experiencing when you play. Additionally, the early detection of a rotator cuff injury can usually be treated non-surgically.

Power serving comes from optimal shoulder function—something that can only be achieved with good mechanics that create a stable center of rotation for overhead action. Here are a few tips for keeping your shoulders in shape and your serve consistent.

SHOULDER SMARTS

- Have someone you trust (a coach, peer or tennis pro) evaluate your serving mechanics and make adjustments if needed.

- Always stretch prior to a rigorous match to improve shoulder stability and mobility. Frequency is the key. Stretching 10 times for one minute each is more beneficial to the body than stretching once for ten minutes!

Stretch 1 – With racquet in your right hand, place your left hand on your right elbow and pull the arm straight across your chest. Hold for two seconds and repeat four to five times on each side.

Stretch 2 – With your racquet in your right hand, reach behind your head and pull the racquet downward with your left hand. Hold for two seconds and repeat four to five times on each side.

The doctor-recommended prescription

for protecting your shoulder and preventing injury will vary based on your pain level. Here are the typical medical approaches to alleviating shoulder pain, if you have:

MILD PAIN

Activity Modification – reduce the frequency of tennis play or temporarily switch from singles to doubles

Medication – use over the counter anti-inflammatories

Physical Therapy – strengthen your musculature and stabilize the shoulder, reducing injury risk

MODERATE PAIN

Add corticosteroid injections that can reduce inflammation for several months

SEVERE PAIN

- Add an MRI to evaluate tissue damage.

- Consider minimally invasive arthroscopy to diagnose and repair torn joint tissue.

- Use common sense when it comes to protecting the health of your shoulder and consult with a physician if pain does not subside or prevents you from being able to sleep at night.

Augustine Conduah, M.D. is a board-certified orthopedic surgeon. He currently practices at DeKalb Medical Center.

match point

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