

Shoulder pain: Why do I have it?

Do you have shoulder pain? You're not alone. Shoulder pain is extremely common. For many, it limits the ability to do basic tasks such as pruning the garden or placing dishes in an upper cabinet.

Your shoulder is the most flexible joint in your body. As such, shoulders are especially prone to overuse or injury.

Shoulder pain can come from repetitive motions in a job, hobby or sport. It can also come from trauma such as a car accident or fall. Less common is shoulder pain caused by conditions of nearby areas such as spinal nerve, heart disease or gall bladder disorders. Called "referred pain," this type of pain rarely worsens when you move your shoulder.

What causes shoulder pain?

A group of muscles and tendons, called the rotator cuff, hold your shoulder joint in place and allow you to move your shoulder and arm. Most shoulder pain occurs when rotator cuff tendons get trapped under the bony area of the shoulder. Tendons become inflamed or damaged, often resulting in a condition called rotator cuff tendinitis or bursitis.

According to the [American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons](#) (AAOS,) the most common causes of shoulder pain, in addition to bursitis or tendonitis, are:

- tendon tears
- impingement
- instability
- arthritis
- fracture (broken bone)

Less common causes of shoulder pain are tumors, infection and nerve-related problems.

Shoulder pain diagnosis and treatments vary

The AAOS suggests seeking medical care as soon as possible if you have intense shoulder pain from an acute injury. For less severe shoulder pain, it may be safe to rest a few days. See a doctor, however, if time does not help and shoulder pain persists.

A physician will perform a thorough evaluation including medical history and physical examination to find the cause of shoulder pain. Imaging tests such as x-ray, ultrasound, CT or MRI scans may be ordered. Less common is electrodiagnostic testing to evaluate nerve function.

Arthroscopy is a proven technique for shoulder and other joint disorders. During this procedure, a tiny camera and other small instruments are inserted through a small incision to perform:

- *Examination:* an inspection of the shoulder and surrounding areas to confirm a diagnosis and determine extent of injury or disease process.
- *Treatment:* surgery to correct conditions affecting muscles, cartilage or ligaments damaged due to injury, disease or aging.

Very often a single arthroscopic procedure can be used for both the examination and treatment, thus avoiding the inconvenience of two separate procedures. Because it is minimally invasive, arthroscopy may be preferable over other types of more major surgery.

According to the [American Orthopaedic Society for Sports Medicine](#), more than 1.4 million shoulder arthroscopies are performed worldwide each year.

For many shoulder pain diagnoses, physicians will suggest conservative treatment such as rest, ice, medications or physical therapy. But arthroscopy may be a good option, especially if these approaches fail. Ask your physician about your treatment options. And always consider getting a second opinion if surgery is being discussed.