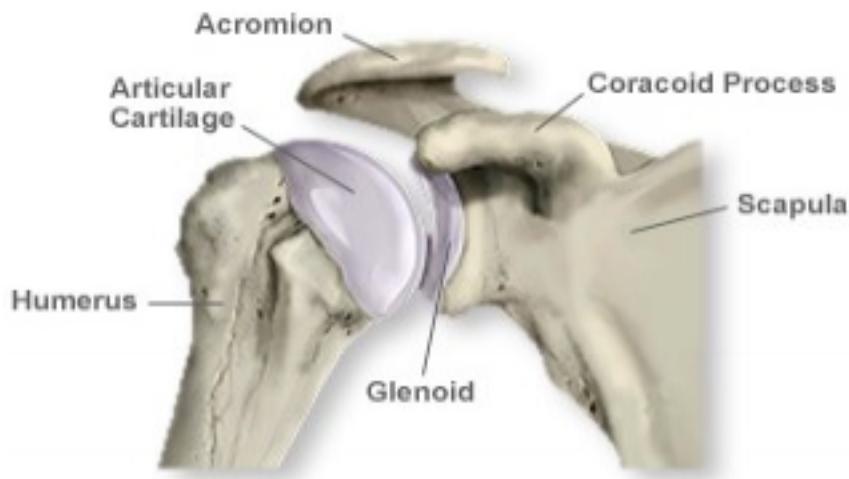


The Basics to Rotator Cuff Injuries

Almost everyone experiences some sort of shoulder pain at least once in their life. From gym goers and professional athletes, to truck drivers and stay-at-home parents. Although there can be several different causes for the shoulder pain, in my experience as a physiotherapist I find that the rotator cuff is more often than not the cause. Rotator cuff injuries, although they take a while to heal, are most definitely treatable with physiotherapy!

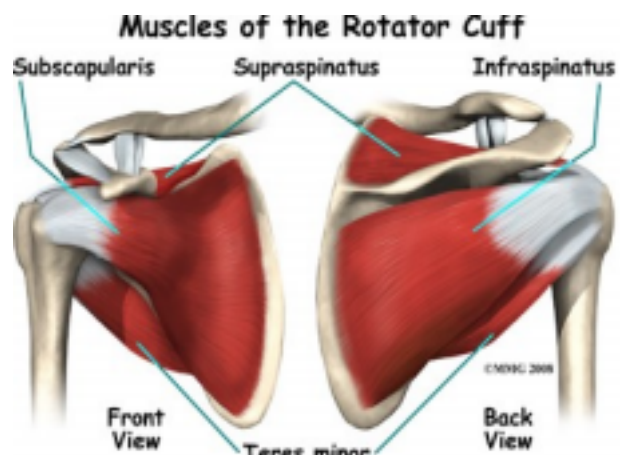
What is the “Rotator Cuff”?

Before understanding how the rotator cuff can cause pain, it is important to first look into the shoulder joint as a whole. The shoulder joint is made up of the humerus (upper arm) and scapula (shoulder blade), with influences from the clavicle (collarbone), sternum (breastbone), and ribs. The connection between the bones of the humerus and scapula is quite weak, putting strain on the muscles that surround the shoulder. Overstraining of these muscles is what can cause pain. This is where the rotator cuff comes in!



The rotator cuff of the shoulder is made up of 4 key muscles:

- Supraspinatus
- Infraspinatus
- Teres minor
- Subscapularis



These muscles provide support to the shoulder joint to allow for smooth and pain-free movement. They are important in supporting the bones in the joint, allowing you to throw a ball or pick up a heavy grocery bag without dislocating your shoulder. When one of these muscles is injured, it causes pain and inflammation which alters the way you move your shoulder, which can lead to further injury. If nothing is done, the cycle repeats until you get chronic pain and permanent changes to the shoulder. That is why reaching out to a physiotherapist and getting assessed in the early stages of the injury is crucial!



How do Rotator Cuff Injuries Develop?

When a patient comes to clinic for a rotator cuff injury, it is likely due to 1 of 2 reasons:

1) An acute, single event injury

These are the people who have never had shoulder pain in the past. They go to the gym and try a new exercise that is beyond their capabilities, and instantly feel a sharp pain in their shoulder. Or they might have gotten into a car accident and the impact caused sudden shoulder pain. Another common example is parents trying to pick up their young child and feeling a sharp discomfort in the shoulder. I find treating these injuries takes less time and are simpler to treat.



2) A chronic injury

These are the people who have had a constant dull ache in the shoulder for several years. It's the people that can no longer lay on the side of their shoulder pain while sleeping because it wakes them up at night. These are the injuries that take longer to treat since scar tissue has built up and the patient has had ample time to develop poor movement patterns.

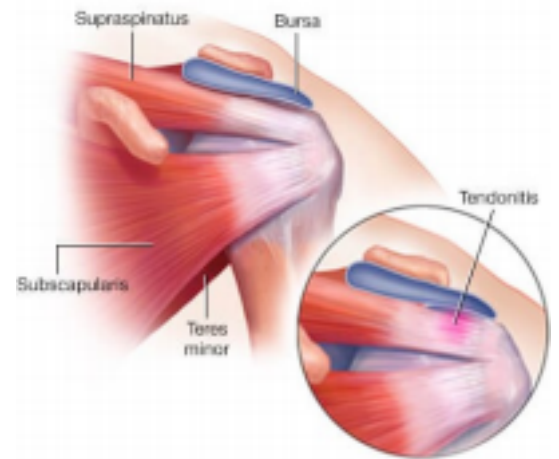


What are the Types of Injuries to the Rotator Cuff?

When a patient comes to see me in clinic, oftentimes they've been told by another healthcare professional that they have "a rotator cuff injury". That is an umbrella term that can mean any type of injury to the rotator cuff. There are 3 main ways the rotator cuff can be injured, and treatment will depend on the type of injury.

1) Tendonitis

This is inflammation of the tendon and likely due to an acute injury. Physiotherapy is often successful with treating this issue.



2) Tear

A tear can include a partial or full tear. A partial tear will require physiotherapy treatment to aid in the healing process, while a full tear may require surgery. A tear can occur from acute or chronic causes.



3) Calcification

This is when the tendon of one of the rotator cuff muscles starts to build up calcium around it. This likely occurs due to chronic loading of the shoulder, and physiotherapy can help address this issue.

Who Can get Rotator Cuff Injuries?

The short answer: anyone! Anyone who uses their shoulder for any activity can injure their rotator cuff. I myself have injured my rotator cuff while lifting a heavy box while shopping. Although the answer is anyone, there are a few factors that pre-dispose people to getting this injury, including:

- Being over the age of 60
- Occupations requiring repetitive shoulder movements, such as painters
- Poor posture
- A previous injury to the rotator cuff

Sometimes, people can be born with joints and muscles that vary greatly from the general public. This puts them at risk of developing rotator cuff issues. It is important these variations are identified early to prevent lifelong shoulder pain.

The Signs and Symptoms of Rotator Cuff Injuries

Some of the most common complaints my patients have about their shoulder with a rotator cuff injury include:

- Dull pain at rest
- Sharp pain with movement, especially reaching above head
- Difficulty reaching behind the back
- Pain with sleep

Basic Exercises to Help with Rotator Cuff Pain

Although no two rotator cuff injuries are the same, here are some basic exercises I give to almost all my patients with shoulder pain! You may notice these exercises are also the basis for postural training (which will be the next blog post *hint hint*). Remember, if your pain gets worse with these exercises, stop doing them!

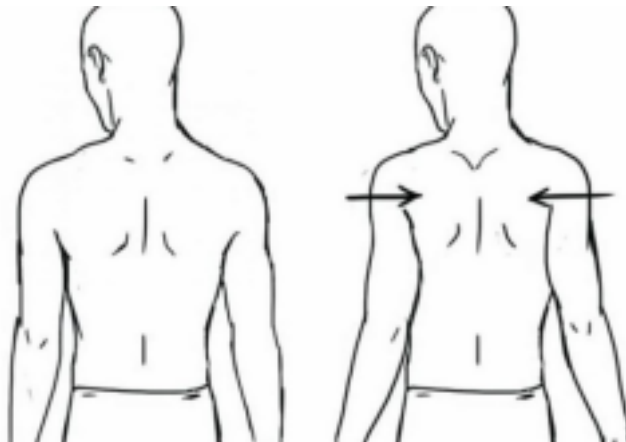
1) Pectoralis stretch

Place your elbow against a doorframe in a bent position and lean your body weight forward. You should feel a stretch at the front of your chest. If this is too painful, drop your arm lower, or put less body weight into the stretch. Hold for 15-30 seconds, and complete 3-4 times. You can do this exercise for both of your shoulders!



2) Scapular retractions

Sit in an upright posture. Pull your shoulder blades back, imagining you're trying to touch them together. Squeeze and hold for 3 seconds before releasing. Complete 10 times, or however many you can do without pain.



What Next?!

If you've been experiencing shoulder pain for one day or even one year, and suspect the rotator cuff may be involved, physiotherapy is the place to go! With a few stretches and strengthening exercises, along with postural education, we will work together to get you back to a pain-free life! Email us at informphysio12@gmail.com for more information!