

Rotator Cuff Injuries

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Definition

Rotator cuff injury is a strain or tear of the rotator cuff. The rotator cuff is made up of four separate tendons that fuse together to surround the shoulder joint. These muscles and tendons connect your upper arm bone (humerus) with your shoulder blade. They also help hold the ball of your upper arm bone firmly in your shoulder socket, called the glenohumeral joint. This combination results in the greatest range of motion of any joint in your body.

Rotator cuff injuries are fairly common. Causes of the injury may include poor posture, falling, lifting and repetitive overhead arm activities. The injury is common among people whose jobs, sports or hobbies include heavy or repetitive lifting, especially with the arm in overhead positions. As you get older, your risk of a rotator cuff injury increases.

Signs and Symptoms

Symptoms may include recurrent pain, especially with certain activities, pain that prevents sleeping on the injured side, grating or cracking sounds when moving the arm, decreased range of motion and/or muscle weakness especially when lifting the arm.

Diagnosis

Evaluation of rotator cuff injuries is based upon a thorough history and physical examination. Occasionally further investigations (x-rays, ultrasound, MRI) help to guide the physician in diagnosing a rotator cuff injury and to rule out other problems. X-rays help to rule out fractures and bone deformities, while an MRI helps to determine the extent of the rotator cuff injury/tear.

Treatment

The treatment plan will depend on the extent of the injury, level of pain, amount of immobility and the age of the patient. The initial treatment is typically rest, ice and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory medications, modified activities, as well as physical therapy to help regain normal motion. If pain persists after several weeks, the physician may inject corticosteroid into the affected area.

Serious tears to the rotator cuff tendons usually require surgical repair. An arthroscope is used to view the shoulder joint and confirm the presence of a tear. The arthroscope can also be used to remove any bone spurs that may be present in the shoulder and through this incision the torn rotator cuff edge may be reattached to the humerus with stitches.