

Frozen shoulder

The shoulder joint is truly remarkable because it moves in absolutely every direction, allowing you to perform daily activities. The ligaments that hold the upper arm bone, (humerus) in the socket are quite loose (lax) to allow for this large range of motion and they don't do much to hold the shoulder together.

The rotator cuff really holds and stabilizes the shoulder joint. These four small muscles completely surround the humerus head like a cuff. They are dynamic, contracting to stabilize or relaxing to allow range of motion. The movement of our shoulder is so free and easy that we often take it for granted.

How does a shoulder "freeze"?

Frozen shoulder (adhesive capsulitis) usually starts with a minor injury, like jarring your shoulder or following tendinitis/bursitis.

Because the shoulder is painful, you'll limit or stop movement to avoid discomfort. Although it's important to rest your body after an injury - 48 hours should be the outside limit. Restricting movement longer than this causes fibrous tissue (adhesions) to form.

You are always moving your shoulders (life) so adhesions don't normally have an opportunity to develop. However, restricted movement for several days causes fibrous tissue to stick to the ligaments, especially in armpit (axilla) where the ligaments are most lax.

Once these adhesions form, the shoulder will feel stiff and uncomfortable. You'll limit your movement in response and the reduced movement will cause more stiffness. Before you know it, you're trapped in a vicious cycle.

If you don't take care of the problem immediately, it will progress from discomfort to severe pain. This pain can make it difficult to do simple things like brushing your hair or putting your arm into a sleeve.

Over time, you will be unable to lift your arm, hence the name frozen shoulder. This pain can be intolerable and will likely spread into your neck as your body tries to compensate.

If you catch the problem early, you can recover quickly with regular massage and home self-care exercises. Otherwise expect a lengthy and uncomfortable course of treatment.

The conventional treatment for a severe case is manipulation, through full range of motion, under anesthetic. Sometimes surgery is used. This kind of treatment will be followed by months of physical therapy or massage therapy.

For moderate cases, doctors may use oral anti-inflammatory drugs, or they may inject cortisone or anesthetic medications into your shoulder to reduce the pain and inflammation.

Your massage therapist will typically treat frozen shoulder through a combination of massage, stretching and joint mobilization procedures, combined with home exercises.