

Rotator cuff tears

Rotator cuff tears are tears of one, or more, of the four tendons of the rotator cuff muscles. The rotator cuff muscles surround the shoulder joint and help provide stability and strength with upper limb movements. Rotator cuff tears are among the most common conditions affecting the shoulder.

Presentation/Symptoms

Many rotator cuff tears cause no pain and may not produce any symptoms. The most frequent cause of rotator cuff damage is age related degeneration (wear and tear), and less frequently by sports injuries or trauma. The most common signs and symptoms include:

- Pain or ache over the front and outer aspect of the shoulder
- Intolerance to overhead activity (such as hanging washing on the line or combing hair)
- Pain aggravated by leaning on the elbow and pushing upwards on the shoulder (such as leaning on the armrest of a reclining chair)
- Pain at night when lying directly on the affected shoulder
- Pain when reaching forward (e.g. unable to lift a litre of milk from the refrigerator)
- Weakness and loss of movement in the shoulder brought about by pain and unwillingness to move the arm

Treatment

Since many patients with partial tears and even some with complete tears can respond to non-surgical management, generally conservative care (physiotherapy) is offered first. If a significant trauma such as a shoulder dislocation, or fracture, or high energy force is known to have been the cause of the rotator cuff tear then surgery is often the choice of treatment.

So what can a Physiotherapist do for you?

Pain

- Topical pain relievers – heat, cold, Anti –Inflammatory medication
- TENS
- Immobilisation
- Massage
- Stretching

Strength

- Rotator cuff strengthening exercises
- Scapula strengthening exercises

Range of motion:

- Hydrotherapy
- Active ROM exercises
- Passive joint mobilisation