

Shoulder Pain? Don't let it hold you back from the activities you love.



By Ronald F. Hollis, MD

Living in Colorado affords us with endless opportunities to lead an active and healthy life style. That, in my opinion, is one of the most rewarding things about living here. With walking, hiking and biking, many Coloradans receive their daily dose of important exercise. Furthermore, with the natural beauty all around us, much of our time is spent keeping our surroundings in good shape with continued mitigation work with spring and fall clean ups around our homes, as well as snow shoveling. Although these activities bring us much enjoyment, they also can be a source of muscle and joint problems and shoulder pain is no stranger to this.

Shoulder pain can be a very frustrating condition that can lead to multiple visits to the doctor. Although there are numerous conditions that cause shoulder pain, the rotator cuff is a common source of discomfort. The rotator cuff is comprised of a dynamic group of four muscles that help initiate and stabilize the shoulder during motion, thus undergoing a lot of stress during the course of normal daily activity. From bundling scrub oak to the pounding of a mountain bike, these muscles can often be overworked. Problems with the rotator cuff span a spectrum of issues from inflammation of the tendon (tendonitis or bursitis) to a complete tear of the tendon from the bone (rotator cuff tears).

While determining tendonitis from a tear can be difficult to diagnose on your own, the signs and symptoms associated with rotator cuff injury are quite classic. Pain, located primarily in the front or side of the shoulder that frequently radiates down the side of the upper arm, is the most common symptom. Pain often occurs with raising the arm or reaching overhead. A specific event may not always be associated with a rotator cuff injury. Rather, an injury frequently presents with a slow progression of symptoms over time. Weakness, or inability to raise the arm, can be seen, especially with rotator cuff tears. Difficulty sleeping is common. If these symptoms persist for more than a week, a visit to your primary physician or an orthopedic surgeon can assist in making the correct diagnosis and help form a treatment plan.

Treatment options for rotator cuff problems vary with the severity of the injury. A common misconception is that a trip to an orthopedic surgeon will result in surgery as the only treatment option. More often than not, surgery is not required. Often, injuries can be treated with non-operative methods such as anti-inflammatory medicines, occasional cortisone injections and physical therapy. Reducing inflammation within the shoulder while building up strength of the rotator cuff muscles with specific exercises typically reduces shoulder pain. Those individuals who do not find relief with conservative treatment may need further imaging studies, like an MRI, to evaluate the extent of the rotator cuff injury.

At times, surgery is required to treat rotator cuff injuries, especially if the tendon is torn away from its attachment site. Reliable studies have shown that a rotator cuff tendon torn away from bone does not have the ability to heal itself and the tear persists. This can lead to long term pain and functional loss as well as make later attempts at surgical repair unsuccessful. Surgical techniques continue to evolve, and often the repair of the rotator cuff can be accomplished through a minimally invasive approach using three small band aid size incisions. Additionally, surgery is often done on an outpatient basis with the patient going home the same day as the procedure. Outcomes following rotator cuff surgery frequently result in lasting pain relief and improvement in function.

Prevention is key. For good shoulder health, maintain a consistent well-rounded shoulder exercise program that focuses on stretching of the shoulder to maintain flexibility and a low weight rotator cuff strengthening program for joint stability. These will not only help you stay out of the doctors office, but will also allow you to continue to enjoy the natural beauty and endless activities that our great Colorado community has to offer.



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