Shoulder pain

A painful shoulder can make even simple tasks difficult to do. You might find it hard to use your arm and hand. But getting treatment can help.

What is shoulder pain?

Several things can cause shoulder pain. A tendon (a band of tissue that attaches your muscles to the bone) can get pinched under the bone in your shoulder. A repeated activity, such as heavy lifting, can damage your tendons. An injury can also damage your shoulder.

If you don't use your shoulder, perhaps after an injury, it can stiffen up. This is called a frozen shoulder. Arthritis in the joints around your shoulder can also cause pain.

What are the symptoms?

Pain from your shoulder can stop you doing things. Simple tasks, such as dressing or eating, can become hard to do.

If your shoulder hurts for more than six weeks, you should see your doctor. If you've had an accident or injury and the pain is very bad, see a doctor as soon as you can. But if the pain is less severe, you might want to wait for one week to see if it improves before seeing a doctor.

What treatments work?

There are lots of treatments that can help with shoulder pain. Your doctor may suggest drugs, physiotherapy, or even surgery.

Drug treatments

Taking a painkiller may help. Ibuprofen is a type of painkiller called a nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug (NSAID). These drugs can reduce shoulder pain in people with severe tendon problems. You can buy ibuprofen yourself, or your doctor can prescribe stronger NSAIDs. You can get tablets, or creams and gels to rub on your shoulder. Paracetamol is another common painkiller you could try.

NSAIDs can cause side effects such as diarrhoea, headaches, or dizziness. Taking high doses for a long time can slightly increase your risk of having a heart attack or a stroke, but taking them occasionally for pain shouldn't cause this problem. If you're taking paracetamol, you need to be careful not to take too much. An overdose can damage your liver.

Occasionally, doctors prescribe strong painkillers, such as codeine. But you should take them only for a short time, because they can be addictive.
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Your doctor can inject a local anaesthetic into the nerves around your shoulder. This is called a **nerve block**. It seems to work best if your shoulder pain is because of arthritis. It may also help with pain from a frozen shoulder. This treatment could make you dizzy or cause pain and bruising in the spot where you have the injection.

Some studies have shown that **steroid tablets or injections** help in the short term with shoulder pain. But after a few weeks, there's not much difference between people who have these treatments and people who don't. Steroid injections rarely cause side effects. The injection could damage a tendon, but this happens to less than 1 in 100 people. Steroid tablets can cause some serious side effects, but this is unlikely if you're taking them for only a short time.

Your doctor may suggest a patch that releases a drug called **glyceryl trinitrate** into your shoulder. Brand names include Nitro-Dur and Minitran. There's not enough research to say how well these work. In the study we looked at, about 1 in 5 people got a headache the first day they used the patch.

**Other treatments**

Having **physiotherapy** can help with a painful shoulder. One study found that people with tendon problems had less pain and could move their shoulder better after six months of physiotherapy. Some physiotherapists have tried **laser treatment** or **electrical stimulation** for a painful shoulder. In some studies, having laser treatment for 10 minutes, two or three times a week, helped people have less pain. There's not enough research to say whether electrical stimulation helps.

**Keyhole surgery**, which is done through small cuts in the skin using special tools, may help some people with shoulder pain. Some bone is shaved away inside your shoulder joint to reduce pressure. This is called **arthroscopic decompression**. It can also be done as **laser surgery**. You probably won't be able to move your shoulder for about six weeks after surgery and full recovery can take several months. Another operation, called **arthroscopic rotator cuff repair**, uses stitches to repair a torn tendon. Physiotherapy may be just as good as an operation for some people.

You might also have **open surgery** to repair a tendon or reduce the pressure on your shoulder joint. Unlike keyhole surgery, this involves making a larger cut in your shoulder and using regular surgical tools. Studies have found that both open and keyhole surgery work equally well, although you may recover faster after keyhole surgery.

**Shockwave therapy** uses strong sound waves to treat a painful shoulder. It may help if you have a type of tendon problem called **calcific tendonitis**, in which you get a build up of calcium in a tendon. But treatment with sound waves can be painful. You may get side effects, such as bleeding under your skin. Doctors have also tried using **ultrasound**, but there's not much research on this.

If you have a frozen shoulder, it may help if your doctor **manipulates the joint**. You'll be given a local anaesthetic so the manipulation doesn't hurt. However, in one study, about 1 in 50 people ended up with a bone fracture, and 1 in 50 people got a dislocated joint. You might also have an injection of salt water into a frozen shoulder, which can
stretch the capsule of soft tissue that forms part of the shoulder joint. The injection may also contain a steroid and an anaesthetic. This treatment is called hydrodilatation or arthrographic joint distension.

Some people have tried acupuncture or injections of anaesthetic into particular points in their shoulder muscle. You could also try putting hot or cold packs on your shoulder. There hasn't been much research on these treatments.

What will happen to me?

There's a good chance the pain in your shoulder will go away with time, particularly if you're young. One study found that about half of the people with shoulder pain had completely recovered within 18 months. But you may get a painful shoulder again.

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