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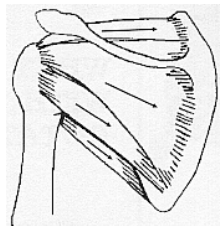
"treating the cause of your problem, not just the symptoms"

Sore Shoulder?

One of the top five most common complaints I see in my practice is shoulder pain. There are many different possible causes but one in particular seems to appear more than the others. The clinical term for it is "rotator cuff tendinitis" or "supraspinatus tendinitis". The shoulder can become very weak and sore, particularly following activities such as repetitively throwing a ball. There is often a dull ache at the back of the shoulder and around the shoulder blade. When you try to lift your arm overhead or behind your back, a sharp pain can be felt at the front or top of the shoulder. The ache can feel worse at night. If left untreated, the same side of the neck will inevitably become stiff and you may even experience dull headaches reaching from the back of your head extending to the forehead. The symptoms may start after falling with your arm outstretched or even doing overhead tasks for prolonged periods of time, such as painting ceilings. In some cases the symptoms start for no apparent reason.

To understand what the problem is, you must first become familiar with what muscles and bones are involved. Under the main shoulder muscle (the deltoid), there are four smaller muscles (supraspinatus, infraspinatus, teres minor, and subscapularis). Their job is not to forcefully move the shoulder, as when lifting objects. Instead, they function to hold or stabilize the shoulder joint so that it can work efficiently as you do your daily activities. The shoulder joint is a ball and socket joint. The ball of your arm bone (humerus) fits snugly into the shallow socket of the shoulder blade (glenoid fossa of the scapula). The four muscles reach from the shoulder blade and attach to the upper end of the arm bone (humerus) – see diagram. When you raise your arm, the ball of the humerus rotates in the socket of the scapula. The four muscles we discussed then have the job of holding the ball of the humerus tight in the socket of the scapula. If these four muscles are weak or injured, the ball will migrate or slide upward and rub on the top of the socket (called the acromion of the scapula) when you raise your arm. If this happens repetitively or forcefully, the tendons and bursa located between the ball of the humerus and the acromion of the scapula become pinched and very sore – see diagram.

In regards to treatment of any physical problem, you must treat the cause of the problem, not just the symptoms. By taking anti-inflammatory medication or receiving steroid injections in the joint, you will decrease the inflammation/pain but it will not correct the muscle problem. This makes you prone to having the problem return in the near future. Although you may need medication to relieve some of the pain/inflammation, a few simple exercises should also be done to restore the strength of the four rotator cuff muscles. Once this is done and the shoulder can work efficiently, the pinching of the tendons and bursa will stop and the shoulder will heal on its own. Every patient in my office who has this problem is given these exercises. I will give a detailed description of them in next week's article.



The four muscles of the Rotator Cuff

