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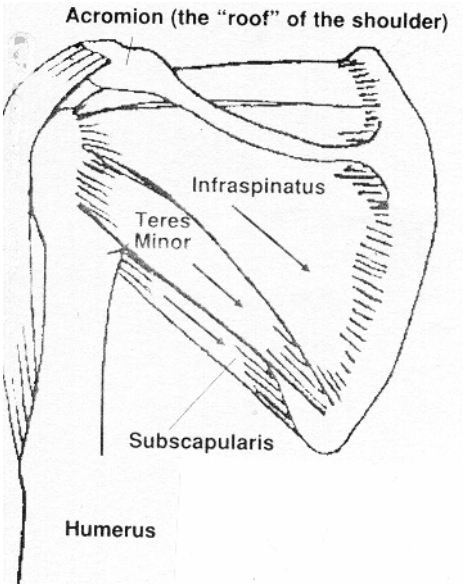
"treating the cause of your problem, not just the symptoms"

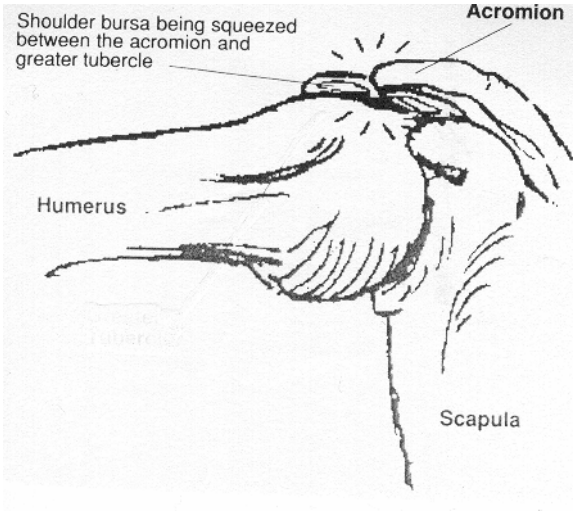
Pain in Your Shoulder?

Have you noticed that when you raise your arms over your head, particularly if you have to maintain that position for a long period of time, your shoulders fatigue quickly or become painful? In more severe cases, you may even feel extreme weakness or acute sharp pain in one or both of your shoulders as soon as you try to lift your arms even slightly.

There are many possible causes of shoulder pain but one in particular seems to present itself in my office more than any other. The clinical term for it is “rotator cuff tendonitis” or “supraspinatus tendonitis”. The shoulder can become very weak and sore, particularly after completing prolonged overhead tasks and other activities such as repetitively throwing a ball. In some cases the symptoms start for no apparent reason. Initially, you may feel a dull ache at the back of your shoulder and shoulder blade. When you try to lift your arm overhead or behind your back, a sharp pain may be felt at the front or top of the shoulder. The ache can feel worse at night. If left untreated, the same side of your neck will inevitably become stiff and you may even experience dull headaches reaching from the back of your head extending to your forehead.

To understand what the problem is, you must first become familiar with what muscles and bones are involved. Underneath your main shoulder muscle (the deltoid), there are four more muscles. Their job is not to forcefully move your shoulder, as when lifting objects. Instead, they function to hold or stabilize your shoulder joint so that it can work efficiently as you do your daily activities. Your 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 (scapula). These four muscles (supraspinatus, infraspinatus, teres minor, and subscapularis) 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 of the humerus will migrate or slide upward and rub on the top of the socket of the scapula – see diagram. If this happens repetitively or forcefully, the tendons and bursa located between the bones become pinched and very sore.





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, you will decrease the inflammation and pain where the tendon and bursae are being pinched. But, the problem with the rotator cuff muscles will not be addressed. Then, whenever you attempt repetitive or overhead tasks, the likelihood of the symptoms returning is still high. Although in severe cases you may need medication to relieve some of the pain and inflammation, a few simple exercises (which I will discuss next week) should also be done to restore the normal strengthening 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.

Before starting any exercises for your potential shoulder problem, you should have it examined by a chiropractor so that an accurate diagnosis can be made. Then, he or she will likely teach you the necessary exercises and what activities you should avoid to prevent the problem from occurring in the first place.