

Orthopaedic Connection

Understanding The Rotator Cuff

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Transforming patient information into patient understanding.

This is not the first time I have written about the rotator cuff and I'm sure it won't be the last. There are very few patients who have not heard of the rotator cuff. There is a lot of misunderstanding about it which is why I choose to bring it up again.

Muscles and Tendons

Your rotator cuff is composed of four muscles and tendons that encircle the humeral head (ball) and help hold the ball in the socket. Since the shoulder joint is by far the most movable joint in the body, the rotator cuff has a lot of work to do! The tendons attach around the ball. The muscles originate from the scapula (shoulder blade) and continue as tendons. I won't confuse you by listing the tendon's names as that is not important.

What's Happening?

Actually most of the patients I see with shoulder problems did not have an injury to the shoulder. They can remember "something" happening even years ago which probably doesn't relate to what is now felt.

Why does the rotator cuff have so many problems? I think the chief reason is that the tendons on top of the ball have very little space to move under the bony projection that sits on top of the tendons. Everything is packed in there and works beautifully until some inflammation and wear and tear changes occur from our daily living activities.

It is probably very hard to injure a rotator cuff that is perfectly normal.

Subtle Changes

There are many factors that contribute to rotator cuff damage. Changes are building up over time and you don't even know it. Then perhaps you fall on your shoulder or pull or lift something too heavy and symptoms of pain begin that don't go away. The subtle wear and tear changes were there before you fell or lifted, but you weren't aware of the changes or perhaps chose to ignore the warning signs.

The Four Horsemen of Shoulder Trouble

In dramatic lore they were conquest, war, famine and death.

In the drama of the shoulder they are

- Repetitive overhead activities
- Degeneration
- Impingement syndrome
- Imbalance of muscles

Overhead Use

Rotator cuffs don't like us painting a wall or ceiling. They don't like us to play tennis, pitch baseballs or work in occupations that involves the arms working above the shoulder. So don't do those things and you will be fine! Stress on the rotator cuff and its bursa leads to trouble.

Degeneration

If you don't want your rotator cuff to undergo breakdown of tissue (collagen) you'll have to stay under 40. After 40 the rotator cuff tissues become less resilient and more prone to injury and inflammation.

Impingement

Pinching and irritation of the rotator cuff tendons under the bony shelf or roof I mentioned before is called impingement. The collar bone and acromion joint (the AC joint) undergoes changes that rub on the tendons too. Calcium deposits can appear in the tissues.

Pain

Pain is the most common symptoms of rotator cuff problems. It is quite variable actually.

There are a lot of different patterns that you need to know about.

I have a lot more to cover about the rotator cuff so will you please come back next week to learn more about the rotator cuff tendons wearing out and tearing? See you then.

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