

Orthopaedic Connection

Can A Frozen Shoulder Be Thawed?

By Thomas J. Haverbush, M.D.
Orthopaedic Surgeon

Transforming patient information into patient understanding.

I have written about “Frozen Shoulder” before the Disney movie *Frozen*! It is a fairly common condition I see in the office so I felt it merited another class.

Typical story: One day you are doing OK and the next morning you wake up and one shoulder feels somewhat stiff and sore. You say you must have slept on it wrong and decide to rest it for a day or two. Very probably the shoulder had not been perfectly normal, but you didn’t pay much attention to it.

As a few days go by and stiffness settles in, the shoulder can feel like it is immobile, literally frozen.

Frozen shoulder starts as a dull ache that gradually worsens. Reaching for something can be very painful.

There is a spectrum of presentations, but in severe cases the joint becomes very rigid and stiff and loses all mobility.

Shoulder Basics

The human shoulder is a marvel of engineering which I will explain. While it is a ball and socket joint basically it is so very different from the hip. Compared with the hip the shoulder is a very shallow ball and socket joint. The shoulder has an incredible range of movement compared with all other joints in the body.

Because it is so shallow to allow for that large range the shoulder has several unique structures.

- Half a ball structure on top of the arm bone (humerus)
- Shallow socket that is a part of the shoulder blade (scapula)
- Labrum - cartilage like structure that deepens the socket.
- Capsule - very tough deep tissue holding ball and socket together.
- Rotator cuff. 4 tendons overlying the capsule.
- Muscles – many muscles overlying all of the above adding strength and stability.

Feels Like Arthritis But –

I probably have never seen a patient in the office with a stiff shoulder that didn’t think it was arthritis. However, in most cases it isn’t arthritis. I confirm that by taking a few simple plain x-rays. Unless the shoulder is very large I can usually get most of the information I need from a plain x-ray. If it is arthritis, the ball and socket begins to come closer together, spurs may form and the ball may look a little less than a perfect ball.

Then Why –

When I tell the patient they don’t have arthritis they are naturally relieved. But the next question is always “Gee Doc, then why does it hurt and why can’t I move it?”

The Cause

It is believed that the underlying cause of the shoulder *freezing up* is the formation of scar tissue deep in the shoulder. The scar tissue makes the shoulder joint capsule thick and it tightens up and may even stick to the ball.

The mystery is why this happens in the first place. It may come from micro trauma to the deep capsule tissue, but we just don’t know for sure.

This condition is different from a tear of the rotator cuff so don't confuse them. The rotator cuff is a collection of 4 tendons that lay on top of the capsule tissue. The micro tearing is in the capsule structure not the rotator cuff which usually is intact (not torn). Whew, I'm making anatomists out of you, but it is an important distinction to make to understand this.

I have run out of space, but I will conclude Frozen Shoulder next time. I am thankful I do not have a frozen shoulder as it would make it hard to do Orthopaedic Surgery!

I hope you all have lots of reasons to be thankful at this Thanksgiving time and I will see you next week.

My patients put their trust in me and what I do improves the quality of their lives.

Gratiot County Herald Archive and Office Website.

I sincerely appreciate all of you loyal readers and patients present and future and welcome all newcomers!

Besides what you read today there is a huge treasure trove of Orthopaedic and musculoskeletal information at www.orthopodsurgeon.com. It contains the Website Library, Your Orthopaedic Connection and complete archive of every GCH article I have written.

I specialize in you. Be well.

Dr. Haverbush