

Argus Orthopaedic Zone

Rotator Cuff Tears

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

Transforming patient information into patient understanding.

I thought it was about time to tell you about one of the most common problems I see in the office; rotator cuff tears.

Most of my patients who have shoulder trouble have at least heard of the term rotator cuff. They know it has something to do with the shoulder, but that is about all.

What Is The Rotator Cuff?

It is a collection of four muscles and their tendons which surround the ball part of the upper arm and hold the ball in its socket. The four tendons have confusing medical sounding names that you don't need to worry about! That's my problem.

The shoulder by the way is the most movable of all the joints in the body. It is also, for that reason, among the most injured.

Why Does It Tear?

Good question. Well, it occurs mostly in people older than forty. It can happen earlier, but it is unusual.

Wear and tear changes gradually creep in causing the thick fibers of the cuff tendons to fray and split. It happens over years.

You have to remember that everything in the shoulder is neatly packed in there under the point (top) of the shoulder that is bone. In a lot of people I see, rotator cuff damage has happened because the cuff tendons get pinched under this bony shelf. This friction causes shoulder pain for sure, but it also causes wear and tear in the cuff.

When Does The Rotator Cuff Tear?

It can happen gradually over time (months or years). This is the usual situation.

It also happens if there is a sudden strain on the shoulder as in lifting or in falling on the arm or shoulder. A healthy cuff won't tear in this way so there are always preceding wear and tear changes.

Another typical event is pulling a cord to start a lawnmower. Big pain, suddenly. Good bye rotator cuff.

Partial Or Full Tear?

Sometimes rotator cuff tendons split and tear a little, but don't tear so much that there is a hole in the tendon cap. The tendons are roughed up and worn and inflamed, but not torn through. This is a partial tear.

When there is a hole in the rotator cuff you have a full tear. These can be a half inch in size or two or three inches. Small tears can hurt as much as big ones in some people.

Typically the rotator cuff tendons tear and pull away from their bone attachment. I see this most often.

What Are The Symptoms?

The most important symptoms of a rotator cuff tear I feel are these;

- Pain or aching in the side, top or front of the shoulder
- The shoulder "catches" then releases with certain movements of the arm
- Shoulder pain at night, can't sleep
- Weakness in raising the arm
- Shoulder muscles can appear to shrink and be smaller
- Dull aching in the arm going to the elbow or wrist

I'm afraid I'm out of time this week. I haven't even touched on how I diagnose a torn rotator cuff. Then there is a lot I have to say about surgical and non surgical treatment and rehabilitation of the shoulder.

Can you please join me again next week as I cover all of the remaining information I want to tell you about the Rotator Cuff?

Office Website and Argus Orthopaedic Zone Archive

All the Orthopaedic and musculoskeletal information you will ever need is yours at www.orthopodsurgeon.com! And what's more - The Argus Orthopaedic Zone Archive is on the website. Every article I have written for Argus can be located on the archive. The complete article! Everyone, please check all this out.

It is a wealth of information about all the things I treat in the office and hospital.

Our goal is simple - To help people return to more pain free, functional lives. Call if you need me. I specialize in you.

Good health. Good life. All the best to you.

Be well.

Dr. Haverbush

