

## Your Active Years

# When You're Shouldering the Pain

**Y**ou don't have to be a baseball pitcher to get hurt like one. Shoulder problems affect millions of Americans each year.

One of the most common problems involves injury to the shoulder's rotator cuff. The term "rotator cuff" refers to the tendons that attach the muscles of the shoulder blade to the upper arm bones. Many shoulder problems are caused by injuries to these tendons.

If a rotator cuff tendon becomes inflamed or partially torn, it can cause pain and limit shoulder motion. If a tendon tears completely, the corresponding muscle can no longer move the arm, and this type of injury usually causes severe pain and weakness. Although the rotator cuff can tear sud-

denly as a result of a serious injury, most rotator cuff problems develop over time.

"Rotator cuff injury is becoming more common and better recognized," says orthopedic surgeon David Johnson, MD, who recently joined Eastern Orthopaedics and Sports Medicine of Vernon. "People are realizing that they don't have to live with the pain any more, because our diagnostic and repair techniques have gotten better."

Orthopedic surgeon Daniel Veltri, MD, of Sports Medicine and Orthopedic Surgeons of Manchester, says rotator cuff problems are common as people age, and also can occur in younger people with trauma or overuse. "Estimates are that 30 to 40 percent of people over

age 70 have some kind of rotator cuff tear, although they may or may not know it," he explains. "Some signs of a rotator cuff injury include pain at night, even

if you are not moving, and pain when moving your arm above the level of your shoulder."

The shoulder is the most versatile joint in the body because it has a wider range of motion than any other joint, which means it can move freely in more directions. The shoulder contains a ball-and-socket joint, with a "ball" at the top of the upper arm and a "socket" formed by the shoulder blade.

In some cases, shoulder pain can be caused by an irritation or inflammation of the rotator cuff rather than an actual tear. Some people also develop calcium deposits or abnormal bone growths called bone spurs, both of which could aggravate tendons and contribute to the weakening or tearing of the rotator cuff.

The surgeons advise people with shoulder pain to have it examined sooner rather than later. "The idea of 'the sooner the better' is very true here," Dr. Veltri says. "The longer you wait, the further the tendon can separate from the cuff. The muscle can atrophy as well, and once that happens you can't turn it back."

Many people experience weakness, pain, swelling, or stiffness in the shoulder long before the rotator cuff actually tears. Although some rotator cuff tears happen suddenly as a result of a fall or injury, most develop gradually as a result of wear-and-tear on the rotator cuff. If medical attention is sought when early warning signs develop, the shoulder may be able to heal on its own, without surgery.



Rotator cuff problems are common as people age, says Manchester orthopedic surgeon Daniel Veltri, MD, holding a model of a shoulder that he uses for patient education.

"We have a better understanding today of the natural progression of shoulder injury," Dr. Johnson says. "Small tears are likely to become large tears over time, so the sooner they can be treated, the better."

A surgeon can diagnose the cause of the pain by maneuvering the shoulder in different positions, and imaging techniques such as x-rays and MRIs can provide a valuable look inside the shoulder. It's a good idea for people with shoulder pain to take note of what activities make the pain seem better or worse, and if any medication, such as anti-inflammatory drugs, seemed to help. "Rotator cuff pain tends to radiate to the front and side of the shoulder, where other types of joint pain are often felt more toward the back," Dr. Johnson says.

Treatment of rotator cuff injury usually consists of starting with the simplest method, the physicians say. Nonsurgical treatments include resting the injured joint to help the pain and swelling subside, applying ice in the first 24 hours after an injury and heat after that, and taking over-the-counter anti-inflammatory drugs such as aspirin or ibuprofen.

Many rotator cuff problems can be successfully treated with gentle exercises prescribed by a doctor or physical therapist that are designed to stretch and strengthen the shoulder muscles. Usually it's best to begin physical therapy as soon after an injury as possible. Injections of steroids directly into the area around the tendon also can help reduce inflammation and pain.

"If there is inflammation or a partial tear, we can try to relieve symptoms with conserva-

tive measures such as local anti-inflammatory injections and strengthening exercises," Dr. Johnson says. "If there is a full tear of the rotator cuff, surgical repair can be done to relieve pain, increase function, and prevent further injury."

If a rotator cuff tendon has torn completely, it usually will not heal completely without surgery. The extent of the injury, how much pain it is causing, and how it is affecting overall function, as well as the person's age and general health, are considered when deciding if surgery is the best treatment option.

A rotator cuff tear can be repaired with traditional open surgery, which requires an incision several inches in length. It also can be repaired using arthroscopic methods, in which a video camera and surgical instruments are inserted through small incisions the size of a buttonhole, and the surgeon makes the re-

pair while watching the progress on a video monitor.

"Because arthroscopy involves smaller incisions, there can be less pain during recovery and less disruption to the muscle," Dr. Veltri says. "But whatever the technique, it basically involves sewing the tendon back onto the bone, so the internal procedure is the same. Studies have shown that people do equally well either way." ■

*To find an orthopedic surgeon on the ECHN medical staff who treats shoulder pain, call Medical Matters, our free physician referral and information service, at 1-888-299-3676, toll-free, any time.*

More people are seeking help today for shoulder injuries, explains Vernon orthopedic surgeon David Johnson, MD, with his wife Liz, their sons George, 4, and twins Benjamin and Thomas, 2, and family dog Kabuki.

