

Subacromial shoulder pain (Irritable)

Your GP or Physiotherapist may have diagnosed you with irritable 'Subacromial Shoulder Pain'. It is also called irritable 'Rotator Cuff Related Shoulder Pain' or 'Shoulder Impingement'. As weird as this sound, these titles all describe the same thing. It essentially means that you have non-threatening shoulder pain that is brought on very easily and/or doesn't settle very quickly. This programme is meant for those whose shoulder pain is easily provoked and can take a long time to settle each time.

It is common but can be self-managed really effectively following some simple advice and exercises. The vast majority will settle down and be fine given enough time.

What can I do to help?

If you are struggling with your pain, the following initial advice will help you during this time:

Pain relief: Basic painkillers (like Paracetamol) or non-steroidal anti-inflammatory gels (such as Ibuleve/Voltarol) are easily available over the counter without the need for prescription. These can be very effective as they lessen your discomfort and importantly allow you to keep moving/active. However, please check the labels for instructions/safe usage and any possible reasons why you should not use them. If you are currently taking any form of medication it is advisable to consult your GP or Pharmacist before taking additional pain relief.

Heat or Ice: Heat is often useful for easing pain using a hot water bottle or wheat pack. Use for 15-20 minutes at a time and repeat several times a day as necessary. However, if you have had a recent injury or flare-up you may find it more therapeutic to use an ice pack to reduce your pain/irritation. A packet of frozen peas wrapped in a tea-towel works well. Leave in place for up to 15 minutes at a time. Again, this can be repeated several times a day if found helpful.

Rest vs. activity: It is usually best to carry out your normal activities, but try not to overdo it during this painful time. Continue with activities as tolerated, if your pain is escalating it is probably a sign you are doing too much. You will find keeping your shoulder gently moving more comfortable than complete rest.

Scans or imaging: Scans or imaging are rarely indicated as these often correlate very poorly with symptoms. Most people without shoulder pain have changes on scans or imaging that doesn't cause any symptoms at all.

Exercise

Exercise can be an extremely beneficial for your irritable shoulder pain as they help ease the soreness and prevent any unwanted stiffness during the time it normally settles.

Please try this exercise programme 2-3 times a day. A small increase in your pain is OK if it goes away within 30-60 minutes and not worse the next day. If this happens, do not worry, go gentler next time and then gradually build up again as tolerated. It may take 5-6 weeks before you start to see improvement.

Exercise 1 - Gentle Wall Pushes:

This can help ease the pain and can be repeated if helpful throughout the day to give pain relief for a few hours at a time

Stand side-on close to a wall with your arm by your side (you can have your elbow either bent or straight)

Press the arm gently sideways into the wall enough to elicit muscle work but gentle enough to be completely tolerable for 10-20 seconds

Rest for 30 seconds then repeat again 3-4 more times in one sitting



Exercise 2 – Pendulums

To help keep your shoulder mobile and ease the pain; gentle movements (sways /circles) with the affected arm dangling down. Lean on a steady surface with the good arm to create this helpful position

Perform 30-60 secs as tolerated

Perform as big as movements as comfortably tolerated



Exercise 3- Table Top Slides

To help keep your shoulder mobile and ease the pain; slide your arm backwards/forwards.

You can give assistance through the other arm by using a towel on the table as shown if needed

Perform 5-10 reps

Perform as big as movements as comfortably tolerated



Exercise 4 – Step Aways

To help keep your shoulder mobile and ease the pain; place both hands on a surface in front of you before stepping your body away creating passive shoulder movement

Move as far as comfortably tolerated; aiming for around 5 repetitions



Once you find these exercises too easy – you can progress to the “*Non-Irritable Subacromial Shoulder Pain Handout*”. The aim is to gradually increase the loading tolerance of your shoulder so it can withstand all loads needed for your usual activities of daily living.

If you are struggling to improve please contact your local Physiotherapy team for further advice