

Exercises/advice for weak and painful shoulders

As a result of wear and tear, overuse or possibly an accident, some of the tendons deep in your shoulder (called the rotator cuff) have worn. It means it can be hard to raise your arm. Unfortunately, it is very difficult and often impossible to repair these muscles as you get older.

There are, however, other robust muscles in your shoulder that can be effectively re-trained to do the work of the injured muscle. Re-training, however, can take a long time and progress is usually slow.

The following exercises need to be done 2-3x daily. The programme can take up a number of months to fully complete but you should start to see some little improvements after the first couple of months. You may still be seeing further improvement if you continue training for up to 18 months to 2 years. For most people it should result in less pain and improved movement and function in your shoulder.

It is important that all exercises should be tolerable. A slight and short-lasting ache/fatigue is fine and shows you are performing the exercises to the right volume. If your pain is escalating or not settling; it is probably a sign you are doing too much. If this happens, do not worry, have a rest day to let it settle then carry on but perhaps a little gentler if it needs.

Exercise 1 – Lying down Arm Sways:

Lying down creates a really good platform to exercise as it helps to eliminate the effect of gravity to make it easier to actively exercise your weak/painful shoulder.

Lying down, assist your arm to the upright position with your arms folded (as shown in the 1st picture). Then perform small arm sways backwards/forwards (around 30-50 degrees only) over your head until you achieve a slight ache/fatigue feeling. Then assist your arm back down to a rest position.

Your aim is to eventually achieve small arm sways for 4-5 minutes without stopping. Once easily performed; make the exercise harder by performing the same exercise but in a more upright position (either propped up by pillows in bed or seated in a raiser-recliner).

You can also perform with the arm outstretched if you prefer with light support around the elbow with the other hand if needed (2nd picture).



Exercise 2 – Pendulums

To help keep your shoulder mobile and ease any 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

Sit at a table with one/both hands resting on a tea-towel. Slide your arms forwards/backwards.

Perform as many reps as you can; aiming for eventual slight ache/fatigue.



Exercise 4 – Wall Slides*

*Once you find table top slides too easy – progress to wall slides.

Stand close to a wall. Slide your hand up and down the wall at a steady pace as high as comfortable

Perform 5-10 repetitions aiming for slight and short-lasting ache/fatigue

When you can perform this exercise easily you can progress by doing it without the support of the wall and eventually adding a light weight



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

Pain relief: Basic painkillers (like Paracetamol) or non-steroidal anti-inflammatory gels (such as Ibuprofen or Voltarol gel) are cheap and 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 your shoulder moving. 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. Listen to your body and remember to pace yourself. If you can adapt very painful/difficult tasks (such as using clothes horses rather than reaching for the overhead washing line) then do this to keep your shoulder symptoms to a reasonably tolerable level.