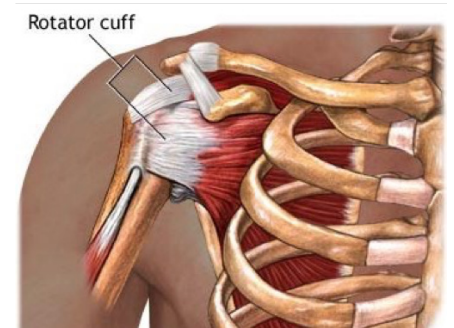


## Definition

*Rotator Cuff Injuries* are a common cause of shoulder pain and disability. The rotator cuff is a collection of four muscles and their tendons, which work together to lift and rotate the arm and to stabilize the ball of the shoulder within the socket of the joint. There can be several different types of rotator cuff injuries which can include:

*Impingement/Tendonitis or Bursitis:* This is when the tendons impinge or become squeezed against the bones that are the roof of the shoulder. This can damage or irritate the tendon, causing swelling and inflammation. Over time, a tear can occur or scar tissue can replace healthy tissue.

*Tear:* This is when the tendon and or muscle tissue becomes frayed or torn. It takes great force to tear a healthy rotator cuff tendon, but even a simple motion like lifting a suitcase can cause a rotator cuff tear in someone whose shoulder is already damaged.



## Clinical Symptoms

The symptoms of a rotator cuff disorder can include pain, stiffness and weakness in the shoulder. Pain with reaching overhead is classic. Most often, the pain is on the back and side of the shoulder and may radiate down the upper arm. Initially, it may be painful or difficult to do everyday things such as comb your hair, tuck in a shirt, or reach for something. You may experience pain at night and have trouble sleeping on the arm. Over time the pain may become noticeable at rest. Most commonly, the symptoms are gradual and are caused by normal wear and tear over many years. Symptoms can develop acutely following trauma such as a lifting injury or a fall on the affected arm. When a tear occurs with an injury, there may be a sudden acute pain or snapping sensation and an immediate weakness of the arm.

## Who gets Rotator Cuff Injuries?

Anyone can get it but it is more common in certain patient populations. As people age, everyday activities can lead to changes and eventual damage to the rotator cuff. Rotator cuff tear is most common in people who are over the age of 40. Younger patients may develop rotator cuff injuries following trauma, work or sports activities. Repetitive overhead activities such as tennis, swimming, stocking shelves or painting can cause degeneration of the rotator cuff tendons over time. A cuff injury may also happen with another injury to the shoulder such as a fracture or dislocation.

## How do you know I have a Rotator Cuff Injury and not something else?

The symptoms that people describe are common and tests performed in the office can confirm the problem. Your physician will take a thorough history and then examine your shoulder and arm. Depending upon the results of the examination in the clinic, additional tests may be needed such as an x-ray to check the bones of the shoulder or MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) to evaluate the tendons and soft tissues.

## What is the treatment?

It is important to treat a rotator cuff problem. Without treatment, your shoulder may get weaker and stiffer. Treatment options usually start with a program of rest and modifying or lessening the frequency of activities that aggravate your symptoms such as overhead lifting or reaching. You may be given a course of anti-inflammatory medication (NSAIDs). You may be referred for physical therapy to guide you in activity modification, strengthening exercises, and treatments to help reduce the pain and inflammation. Most rotator cuff disorders are not treated with surgery, but it is important to give treatment time to work. It may take several weeks or months to restore the strength and mobility to your shoulder.

Often, physicians will give a steroid injection into the shoulder. These injections don't cure the injured tendon, but can help to relieve pain and inflammation so you are able to do exercises to strengthen the shoulder.

If non-operative treatment does not relieve your symptoms, surgery may be considered. Many techniques have been described for the treatment and repair of torn rotator cuffs. At Starling Orthopedics, our preference is to treat rotator cuff tears *arthroscopically*. Arthroscopic surgery involves the use of a fiber optic camera and small instruments. These advanced tools allow our surgeons to repair injured tendons through several small incisions, rather than one large one.

## What is the recovery like?

After the surgery, you will manage your pain with medication and ice. Your arm will be immobilized in a sling or arm splint to allow the tear to heal. The length of immobilization will depend on the severity of the tear and may range from as little as one week to as long as six weeks or longer. A strong commitment to rehabilitation is important to achieve a good surgical outcome and restore the motion and strength of your arm. For the most severe and complicated rotator cuff repairs, it can take four to six months or more to regain the function of your arm for return to work and normal activity.

