



Acute Shoulder Pain

→ A partnership approach to pain management

> What Is Acute Shoulder Pain?

Acute shoulder pain is pain felt in the shoulder region that lasts for a short time (i.e. less than three months).

Around 10% of people have acute shoulder pain at some stage in their lives. Usually, the pain settles down over several weeks, but this varies from person to person. Shoulder pain may happen again over time.

> What Causes Acute Shoulder Pain?

In most cases it is not possible to determine the exact cause of acute shoulder pain. However, it is not necessary to have a specific diagnosis of the cause in order to manage the pain effectively.

It is rare for the pain to be caused by a serious medical condition.

> What Should I Do When I Have Acute Shoulder Pain?

If your pain bothers you, it is important to see your health practitioner, to work with them to manage your pain, and to stay active.

1 See your health practitioner

A history and a physical examination are needed to assess for any serious medical conditions that may be associated with your pain, although these are rare.

Your practitioner can provide you with information about your pain after they've assessed you. Ask for an explanation if unfamiliar terms are used. Sometimes a diagram can be useful.

MAIN MESSAGES

- Work with your health practitioner to manage your pain and address your concerns
- Stay active

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

A panel of experts recently reviewed the scientific studies on the effectiveness of treatments for acute shoulder pain. They found that there is both a lack of evidence (i.e. few or no scientific studies conducted) and a lack of high quality studies on pain-relieving treatments for acute shoulder pain.

The findings of this review are published in the report *Evidence-Based Management of Acute Musculoskeletal Pain* available at www.nhmrc.gov.au. The results are summarised below.

Effective

Measures that are effective for relieving acute shoulder pain are anti-inflamma-

tory drugs (non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, or 'NSAIDs') and corticosteroid injection into the shoulder. Both of these offer short-term pain relief.

In specific conditions that cause shoulder pain (calcific tendonitis and rotator cuff disease, respectively), ultrasound and exercises appear to be effective.

Mixed results*

There are some studies showing that acupuncture relieves acute shoulder pain and some showing it does not work.

Inconclusive*

Studies on the use of manual therapy, extracorporeal shock wave treatment

(ESWT), oral corticosteroid medication, nerve blocks and TENS for acute shoulder pain have not tested these treatments against placebo.

No studies done*

There are no studies that have looked at whether pain-relieving medication (analgesics) or surgery are effective for people with acute shoulder pain.

*** It is important to note that these findings do not mean that these measures will not help you; they indicate that more research is needed.**



Australian Government

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Additional investigations, such as xrays and blood tests, are not needed in the majority of cases of acute shoulder pain. They do not help you with your pain or with the use of your shoulder.

It is normal to worry about the cause of your pain and the impact it may have on you. Talking to your health practitioner about your concerns can be helpful. You will usually find there is no serious cause and that there are ways to relieve the pain.

2 Work with your health practitioner to manage your pain

The goal is to help you find ways to manage your pain and return to your usual activities.

Most people find that their shoulder pain settles down over time as healing occurs. Pain-relieving measures may help you cope with your symptoms while nature takes its course.

There is a range of pain-relieving measures available. While there are few scientific studies proving their effectiveness, this does not mean that a particular measure will not help you (see What the Research Says).

When considering what measures to use for your pain, it is helpful to discuss the following with your health practitioner:

- Your pain level and your concerns
- What measures are available to relieve acute shoulder pain (what they involve,

how they work, their benefits and risks, their effectiveness)

- Your need for additional information

3 Stay Active

Your pain may make it difficult for you to carry out your usual activities, and you might want to avoid using your shoulder completely.

However, it is important to resume normal activities as soon as possible. Staying active helps to prevent long-term problems.

You may need to use pain-relieving measures to help you return to your usual activity level. If you are working, the plan could include a programme of selected duties or reduced hours of work. This applies to work at home as well.

Follow-up visits

It is important to maintain contact with your health practitioner.

If the pain is not settling down or is getting worse, you may need further assessment.

Follow-up visits provide you with an opportunity to obtain more information. If you have any questions to ask your health practitioner, write them down and discuss them at your next visit.

The content of this information sheet is based on: Australian Acute Musculoskeletal Pain Guidelines Group (2003). *Evidence-Based Management of Acute Musculoskeletal Pain*, available at www.nhmrc.gov.au

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