

The rotator cuff is the name given to the four muscles that keep the ball of the shoulder joint in the socket. They come from the shoulder blade (scapula) and go to the upper arm bone (humerus).

They work together to support the shoulder joint, and allow normal, controlled movement.

How is the rotator cuff damaged?

The rotator cuff can be damaged in 1 of 2 ways:

- Injury due to trauma — Any sudden unprotected movement can produce a tear in the rotator cuff. For example, a fall on to the arm, or a fall where you stop yourself with your arm. It may also happen whilst lifting or throwing.
- Repetitive strain injury — Repeated movements can build up to cause rotator cuff problems. The risk is higher when the movements are above the head or need a higher force.

What are the symptoms of a rotator cuff tear?

The majority of people's symptoms will settle over time, this can take several weeks or months. Many people have a gradual improvement and return to function.

Some symptoms you might experience include:

- Some tears may cause pain but others may not. Depending on the cause of the problem the pain may come on suddenly (common in a tear) or gradually (common in tendon wear and tear). Pain is usually felt over the outside and upper part of the arm. It is often worse when moving the arm especially overhead movements, or across the body.
- You may have reduced strength in the shoulder.
- You may have clicking or catching sensation when you move.

How is a rotator cuff problem diagnosed?

If you see a healthcare professional they will ask you questions and carry out a clinical examination to help establish the cause of your problem. Sometimes an X-ray may be arranged to see if there is wear and tear in the joint. If more investigations are needed you may be sent for an ultrasound or MRI (Magnetic Resonance Image) scan.

What may the treatment be for a rotator cuff injury?

Treatments can include:

- Short term rest — Rest your shoulder initially, avoiding any movements that cause you pain. Start to do gentle movements as soon as possible to prevent any stiffness in your shoulder.
- Ice

- Painkillers or Anti-inflammatories
- Physiotherapy — Following an assessment, a programme of exercises may be given to help improve the stability and control around the shoulder joint. A range of movement exercises help early in the recovery period to keep the joint mobile.
- Advice — Modifications to activities or work tasks and/or equipment.
- Injections (and physiotherapy) — A mixture of local anaesthetic and steroid may be given to help reduce your pain.

If your symptoms fail to improve, other methods of treatment may be suggested.

A small number of patients need an operation. An operation is usually only done if your shoulder problem does not improve with treatment as described.

Some exercises to help when your shoulder is sore

Try putting a pillow under your sore arm and squeezing it against your side. This is an easy exercise to do and may help your pain.

You can find some [simple exercise to get you started](#) in the Musculoskeletal (MSK) Zone on NHS inform.

Further information

If you have a muscle, bone or joint problem, visit the [MSK Zone](#) on NHS inform for self-management advice and exercises to get you moving normally, and safely.