

## Physiotherapy Department

# Self help for problem shoulders

### What are the causes of a painful and /or stiff shoulder?

There are many reasons why pain and stiffness may occur at the shoulder. The simplest cause may be a minor strain of a muscle, tendon or ligament, (and there are many around the shoulder).

This may be due to an unaccustomed or uncontrolled movement. Often poor posture of the neck, upper back and shoulders can lead to increased wearing in the shoulder joints and the surrounding soft tissues. This is often accompanied by over or underuse of muscles acting around the area. Poor muscle control can lead to instability of the joint and an increased risk of injury. Instability in its- self can produce pain, because the bones (the Acromion, part of the Scapular and the Humerus) are coming into contact with each other or are pinching the tendons that lie between them.

### How should I manage the pain and stiffness?

- Pain can be relieved by taking simple pain-killers such as Paracetamol or NSAID's (Non-Steroidal Anti-inflammatory Drugs) such as Ibuprofen, which should be prescribed by your GP or at least purchased under the advice of a qualified Pharmacist.
- The application of an ice pack or heat pack can also relieve pain and encourage earlier and better healing of any damaged tissues. (See below for advice on how to apply these packs.)
- Your GP or Consultant may refer you for Physiotherapy where your shoulder will be assessed fully for the cause of your pain and appropriate exercises taught to correct postural abnormalities, muscles weaknesses and any signs of instability.
- Just because you have some pain you should not stop moving your arm. Stopping movement will cause it to become more and stiffer and the pain will become worse. However you might need to restrict how much weight you lift and the height to which you attempt to lift it. Try not to guard the shoulder by pulling the head over sideways towards the painful shoulder or by pulling the shoulder up to your ear or by pulling your shoulder too far forward of your ear line. Doing these actions will over-activate muscles acting around the shoulder and neck and again increase your pain.
- If you do start some gentle exercises advised by your GP and/or Physiotherapist you should move to the range where you just touch your pain, but pain should not be aggravated for more than 15 minutes after stopping your exercises. It is often helpful to do your exercises within 15 minutes of taking any pain relief tablets and pain relieving ice or heat pack can be applied after exercising.



## Patient Information

### How to apply Ice safely:

- Crush some ice cubes and wrap in a damp hand towel, or use a bag of frozen peas or purchased ice pack wrapped in kitchen towel to prevent ice burn to your skin;
- Apply to the area of pain and strap in place with a crepe bandage to maintain good skin contact;
- Leave on for 10 - 15 minutes;
- Never leave on for longer than 20 minutes;
- This may be repeated every two-three hours if necessary.

**Do not go to sleep whilst ice is in contact with your skin.**

### How to apply heat safely:

- Partially fill a hot water bottle with hot water (not boiling), securely close bottle and wrap it in a towel, or you may use a purchased wheat pack, strictly follow its instructions for heating. (Take great care if heating in a microwave oven particularly when removing it from the oven, it may be extremely hot when first heated).
- Place over area of pain and leave in place for 10- 15 minutes. The pack should feel just comfortably warm **not** hot.
- Heat pack applications can be repeated up to three times a day.

**Do not go to sleep whilst the heat pack is in contact with your skin.**

### Further Information

If you need further information please contact your Therapy Department:

**University Hospital, Coventry: Tel 024 7696 6016**

**Rugby, St Cross Hospital: Tel 01788 663257**

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