Stiff Shoulder Advice and Exercises

Physiotherapy Department

The shoulder can stiffen up for a number of reasons;

- As a result of injury.
- Underlying degenerative condition.
- Developing a capsulitis or “frozen shoulder”.

What is a frozen shoulder?
This is stiffness caused by the tightening up of the capsular ligament which encloses the shoulder joint. As yet the cause is unknown but it is most common in people over the age of 40. People with diabetes may also be more susceptible. Onset is usually gradual and the duration can vary from a few months up to 1-2 years. The problem will gradually resolve by itself. Pain in the early stages can be severe on movement with aching at rest and can affect sleep. This can be followed by a period of stiffness with pain and then a period of mainly stiffness.

How can you help?
If the pain bothers you and especially if it affects your sleep, try some simple measures to control the pain.

- Painkillers +/- ant-inflammatories from your GP or over the counter from a pharmacy.
- Mild heat from an insulated hot water bottle or heat pack designed to be put in a microwave. Always ensure enough padding to avoid burning.
- Ice can be used with caution. A bag of crushed ice or frozen peas must be wrapped in a damp towel in addition to applying oil or cream to the skin. This is to avoid the ice sticking to your skin and causing a burn. Do not use ice on the shoulder if you have a history of a heart condition. Anyone experiencing chest pain should remove the ice immediately. Ice or heat should be used for about 15 minutes.
- If pain troubles you at night, try resting your arm on a pillow and ask your GP for slow release pain relief.

Exercises for restricted movement
For any shoulder stiffness, exercises will help to increase the circulation to the area, mobilise scar tissue and help you to obtain the best possible function. If pain is an issue, stretch up to the threshold of pain and use controlled rather than rapid movements. If you are taking pain relief wait until it has taken effect before exercising. Use heat or ice afterwards if aching persists. There is no point in forcing movements through pain as it will not be effective and will only increase pain severity and make it harder to repeat the exercise later. If you do overdo it, don’t be anxious. Use your pain control then resume the exercises more gently.
Stand with your elbows bent to 90º and hold a pole in front. Keep your elbows still and push your affected arm away from your body so the arm rotates. You can put a rolled up hand towel under your armpit to reduce cheating movements. Hold for 5 seconds 
10 repetitions twice a day

Stand facing a wall. Place a towel on the wall one hand on top of the other (painful hand underneath). Slide your hands up the wall until you feel the stretch.
10 repetitions twice a day

Lie on your back, holding a pole in both hands. Raise both hands overhead until you feel a stretch.
10 repetitions twice a day

Stand with your elbows bent to 90º and hold a pole in front. Keep your elbows still and push your affected arm away from your body so the arm rotates. You can put a rolled up hand towel under your armpit to reduce cheating movements. Hold for 5 seconds
10 repetitions twice a day

Try to reach behind your head with both hands. Hold for 5 seconds
10 repetitions twice a day
Try to reach your hands up behind your back.
5 repetitions twice a day

Stand holding a stick behind your back. Lift the stick upwards away from your body.
5 repetitions twice a day

Stand in a corner 1-2 feet from the wall with a hand on each wall. Lean into the corner until you feel a stretch. You can vary the stretch by raising or lowering the arms or by standing further away.
Hold for 5 seconds
5 repetitions twice a day

Sit in a chair with your arm on the table. Bend forward and slide the arm forward on the table until you feel a stretch.
Hold for 5 seconds
10 repetitions twice a day
If you have any comments about this leaflet or the service you have received you can contact:

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If you would like this information in another format or language contact the above.

Potřebujete-li tyto informace v jiném formátu nebo jazyce, obraťte se prosím na výše uvedené oddělení

Amennyiben ezt az információt más formátumban vagy nyelven szeretné megkapni, vegye fel a kapcsolatot fenti részlegünkkel.

Jeżeli są Państwo zainteresowani otrzymaniem tych informacji w innym formacie lub wersji językowej, prosimy skontaktować się z nami, korzystając z ww. danych kontaktowych

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