

Frozen shoulder

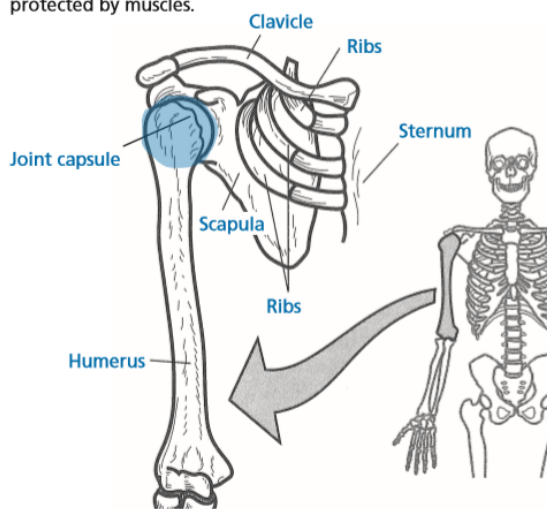
Patient Information



This booklet is to help you understand more about your frozen shoulder. First of all, don't worry. Frozen shoulder does get better in the end, and although it may be extremely painful, it isn't dangerous.

The shoulder joint

The ball at the top of the arm bone (humerus) fits into a shallow socket, making the shoulder joint. The joint is surrounded by a loose bag (called the joint capsule) and protected by muscles.



What is a 'frozen' shoulder?

In frozen shoulder, the joint capsule (the bag around the shoulder joint) gets irritated for some reason. This hurts, and makes moving the arm feel difficult. Later on the joint capsule itself gets tight and this is why your shoulder feels so stiff.

How common is it?

It affects around one in ten people of working age. It's most common in people between 40 and 70 years old.

Why does it happen?

We don't know. Researchers are still trying to answer this question.

How is it diagnosed?

We base the diagnosis on three things:

1. What you tell us about your symptoms
2. Our examination of your shoulder; and
3. A normal x-ray.

Some people get upset when they are in a lot of pain but they are told they've got a normal x-ray. They think something serious is being missed. But the x-ray is just to rule out the other conditions that can cause a stiff shoulder. This is because all the other conditions that can cause a stiff shoulder would show up on an x-ray. When the x-ray is normal and your shoulder is stiff then this confirms your diagnosis of frozen shoulder.

Main phases of frozen shoulder

There are two main phases, but these overlap a lot.

1. Pain predominant phase

Most people notice pain before stiffness. The pain and stiffness gradually increase but the pain is the predominant problem. This pain is often described as a constant dull ache. At worst, the pain can be there even at rest, and spread right down the arm. Some people describe sharp pain on sudden movements but say this doesn't last long. The pain is often worse at nighttime. Lying on the affected side can be painful or even impossible. Many people say this disturbs their sleep. Lying on your arm may hurt but it won't cause any harm to your shoulder.

2. Stiffness predominant phase

The shoulder becomes more and more stiff. This is most noticeable with twisting movements such as trying to put your hand behind your back or behind your head.

Over time, the pain gradually eases and stiffness becomes the main problem. Once the pain eases people usually find it easier to manage, especially at nighttime.

Then the stiffness eases and more or less resolves over time. The whole process may last from a few months to two to three years, but remember that you won't feel this bad for the whole time.

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Many people say they get relief from heat, for instance a hot water bottle. Chemists also sell re-usable wheat bags for heating up in the microwave before use. These are good because you can mould them to the shape of your shoulder. No matter what sort of heat you use, you must take care not to burn yourself or damage your skin. Always follow the product instructions.

Sleeping positions

It can be hard to find a comfortable position to sleep in when your frozen shoulder is in the pain predominant phase. Lying on the affected side is often painful. Try supporting the arm with one or two pillows. This reminds you not to roll onto the affected shoulder in bed at night. But make sure your neck and your back are supported as well.



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What treatments are there?

Most people with frozen shoulder are successfully treated outside of hospital. Some, however, may need to be referred to hospital where the most common treatments offered are various forms of physiotherapy and operations. We do not know which of these hospital-based treatments works best at this stage of the condition. Researchers are currently trying to answer this question.

Things you can do to help yourself

There are simple things you can do at home that often help, no matter what other treatments you have.

During the pain predominant phase the emphasis is on pain-relief and gentle use of your arm to ease muscle spasm and maintain movement.



When sitting, use a pillow to support your arm / shoulder.

Pain-relief

First, discuss medication with your doctor or pharmacist because they will be able to advise what is suitable for you depending on your symptoms. They will also be able to advise you how best to take your medication to gain the maximum relief from your symptoms.

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Gentle use

Do not be afraid to use your shoulder. It is important that you use your arm for day-to-day activities. Remember that using your arm won't damage your shoulder, but try not to aggravate your pain by doing too much! Especially avoid unguarded or sudden movements because patients have told us this can be very painful.

As the frozen shoulder progresses into the stiffness predominant phase you may feel less need for pain relief.

Finally

Please do not hesitate to approach staff at your hospital for further explanations or if there is anything else you wish to know that has not been covered in this booklet.

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