

Patient information

Frozen shoulder (adhesive capsulitis)

Barts Health Physiotherapy Website:

www.bartshealth.nhs.uk/physiotherapy



What is frozen shoulder?

Frozen shoulder is a condition that leads to pain and stiffness of the shoulder. It's also known as adhesive capsulitis or shoulder contracture.

Symptoms usually gradually get worse over a number of months. Normally, the first thing you notice is increasing pain in the shoulder. This can take a few months. You may then notice the shoulder becomes much more stiff over the next few months.

In most cases, the condition improves within 2 years. It is rare for it to last longer than this.

What causes frozen shoulder?

Frozen shoulder occurs when the flexible tissue that surrounds the shoulder joint, known as the capsule, becomes thick and tight. We do not fully understand why this happens.

The following things can increase your risk of developing a frozen shoulder:

- Diabetes
- Cardiovascular disease

- Previous shoulder injury or surgery
- Neurosurgery
- Thyroid disease
- Dupuytren's Contracture

MRI scans and X-rays are not normally needed in the assessment and treatment of frozen shoulder. Sometimes, however, they are requested by your doctor if they want to make sure nothing else (like a broken bone) is causing your pain and stiffness.

What are the Symptoms?

Pain is usually felt on the outside and top of the shoulder, and sometimes in to the neck and upper arm. Certain movements and daily tasks can make the pain worse, like:

- Brushing your hair / Reaching above your head
- Putting your coat on and off
- Resting with your hand behind your head

There are three common stages of frozen shoulder:

- 'Freezing' phase: There is a gradual loss of movement and pain can get worse. This stage can last between 2 to 9 months.

- ‘Frozen’ phase: Pain often becomes a little less, but shoulder movements become more difficult. In other words, the shoulder gets stiffer. This stage can last between 4 and 12 months.
- ‘Thawing’ phase: The pain and stiffness begin to get better slowly. This can last between 12 and 24 months.

Signs of a serious problem

You should see your doctor quickly if you have shoulder pain and one or more of the following:

- Shortness of breath
- Unexplained severe weight loss
- Significant deformity or swelling
- Chest pain
- Persistent pins and needles or numbness in both arms
- Sudden loss of consciousness (fainting)
- Numbness in the face
- Severe pain unlike any pain you have felt before
- It started with a traumatic incident (e.g. you fell on to your arm)

What can I do to help my frozen shoulder?

A frozen shoulder may get better over time without treatment, but recovery is often slow and can take at least 18 to 24 months. In some people, the condition may not improve for five years or more, although this is rare.

A number of different treatments can be used to improve frozen shoulder. We are still not sure what is the best treatment for frozen shoulder, but some of the following may help reduce you pain:

- Over the counter painkillers like paracetamol or ibuprofen
- Gentle movement of your shoulder as pain allows
- Pacing- this involves you spreading your daily activities or exercise in to smaller more manageable tasks. Consider taking regular breaks for example when cleaning the house.
- Hot or cold packs

What other treatments options are there?

- **Physiotherapy-** Depending on the phase of the frozen shoulder Physiotherapy can provide some relief with exercises and stretches to improve the movement in the shoulder. Hands on treatment called manual therapy may also help. However physiotherapy may have limited effect in early stages.
- **Injections-** If painkillers aren't helping to control the pain; it may be possible to have a corticosteroid injection in your shoulder joint. A 'Hydrodilatation' injection may also be tried. This involves a large amount of fluid injected to the shoulder joint to stretch the capsule. Your doctor will recommend whether you should think about these options.
- **Surgery-** people do not normally need surgery for a frozen shoulder, but it may be recommended if pain and stiffness lasts for too long. Three common operations are called:
 - Manipulation Under Anaesthetic (MUA)
 - Arthroscopic Capsular Release

What exercises can I do to help reduce my shoulder pain and stiffness?

(only complete exercises that do not cause you lots of pain)



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Push your hand towards the floor with your other hand, keeping your elbow still for 1 minute



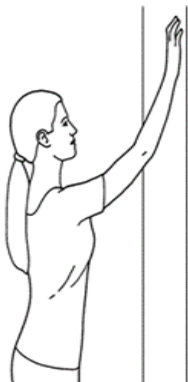
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Lift your arm forward assisting the movement with your other hand. Repeat 10-20 times



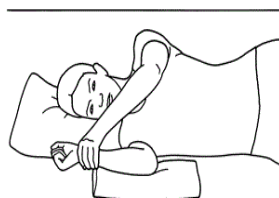
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Stand leaning on a table with one hand. Let your painful arm hang relaxed straight down. Swing your arm to your left and then to your right. Repeat 30-40 times



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Stand facing a wall. 'Walk' your fingers up the wall as high as possible. Reverse down in the same way. Repeat 10-20 times.



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Push your hand towards the floor with your other hand, keeping your elbow still for 1 minute



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Bring your arms alternately behind your neck and back as shown. Repeat 10-20 times

References and Resources

Shoulderdoc.co.uk - <https://www.shoulderdoc.co.uk/section/16>

NHS Choices -

<http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Frozen-shoulder/Pages/Introduction.asp>

CSP -

<http://tees.openrepository.com/tees/bitstream/10149/119765/11/119765.pdf>

What if my symptoms do not improve?

If your pain does not improve with the exercises or your pain increases, please speak to your GP.

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www.bartshealth.nhs.uk/pals

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