

Frozen Shoulder

Frozen shoulder, also called *adhesive capsulitis*, is a common condition that causes pain and severe stiffness in the shoulder and affects daily life and sleep.

There are three stages in frozen shoulder: freezing, frozen and thawing stages.

The first stage (freezing stage) is characterised by pain. There will be increasing pain in the shoulder that may be worse at night. You may slowly start to lose some range of motion in your shoulder. This stage can last anywhere from two (2) to nine (9) months.

In the frozen stage, the pain in the shoulder will start to improve, but the stiffness will continue to worsen. Severe restriction of range of motion of the shoulder will affect daily activities. This stage can last from four (4) to 12 months.

There may be a gradual return of range of motion in the thawing stage, although full recovery may take up to three (3) years.

What are the signs and symptoms?

Possible signs include loss of ability to move the shoulder in all directions (including reaching overhead, behind the back, and behind the head), even with assistance. There will be a pain at the extreme ranges of motion.

What are the causes?

There is often no defined cause for frozen shoulder - it can happen after a shoulder injury or after a prolonged period of immobilisation. There is no connection to hand dominance or occupation.

What are the risk factors?

Frozen shoulder usually occurs between the ages of 40 to 60 and is more common in women. Conditions such as diabetes mellitus, thyroid disorders, and Parkinson's disease may increase the risk of frozen shoulder.

COMMONLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Will alternative therapies, e.g. acupuncture or tuina/massage help?

These may help to temporarily relieve the pain but will not help you regain shoulder range of motion.

What treatment is required?

Physical therapy and **home-based exercises** are the recommended forms of treatment. Physical therapy will help to speed up the return of functional motion and bring about pain relief. With physical therapy, the expected recovery duration of the full range of motion may be up to 1 year.

Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medication will also help to relieve pain and inflammation in the shoulder.

An alternative treatment is a **steroid injection**, which involves injecting a corticosteroid (a powerful anti-inflammatory agent) into the shoulder joint to reduce pain and inflammation. It cannot help restore the shoulder range of motion.

Surgery is rarely needed. If symptoms cannot be relieved by non-surgical methods, your doctor may recommend an **arthroscopic capsular release**. This is a surgical procedure where the surgeon uses small instruments to cut through the tightened tissues in the shoulder. Physical therapy is still recommended after the surgery to prevent the shoulder from stiffening up again.

What are the possible complications if I delay/forego treatment?

You may eventually regain normal range of motion, but it will take a very long time and your quality of life may be severely affected in the meantime.

What can I do to prevent frozen shoulder?

Preventing frozen shoulder from happening is impossible, but early treatment can help to prevent frozen shoulder from getting worse.

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