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Shoulder pain

Shoulder pain can be eased by treatment and exercises that you can do yourself.

But shoulder pain that does not improve after 2 weeks might be a symptom of another condition. You may need treatment.

⚠ Important

Do not self-diagnose. Talk to your GP if you're worried.

Treating shoulder pain yourself

You can usually do things to ease shoulder pain yourself. You usually need to do these things for 2 weeks before shoulder pain starts to ease. It can take 4 to 6 weeks to recover from mild shoulder pain.

To ease shoulder pain:

- stay active and gently move your shoulder
- do not rest your shoulder in a sling for longer than 4 weeks unless your GP tells you to - this may lead to stiffness
- try exercises for shoulder pain – do them for 6 to 8 weeks to stop pain returning
- stand up straight with your shoulders gently back
- sit with a cushion behind your lower back
- rest your arm on a cushion in your lap
- use pain relief so you can keep moving - try painkillers like paracetamol and ibuprofen, and heat or cold packs
- try sleeping more upright with more pillows and avoid sleeping on the affected side
- rest the affected shoulder in the first 7 to 10 days by using the opposite side for activities of daily living
- avoid sports that aggravate it

Things that can make shoulder pain worse

You can make your shoulder pain worse if you:

- completely stop using your shoulder – this can stop it getting better
- do things that seem to make it worse
- make up your own strenuous exercises or use heavy gym equipment
- slouch when sitting – do not roll your shoulders or bring your neck forward

► [Putting heat or cold packs on your shoulder](#)

When shoulder pain may be a sign of something else

Shoulder symptoms	Pain and stiffness that does not go away over months or years
Possible causes	frozen shoulder osteoarthritis rheumatoid arthritis
Shoulder symptoms	Pain that's often worse while using your arm or shoulder.
Possible causes	tendonitis bursitis impingement
Shoulder symptoms	Tingling, numb, weak, feels like it's clicking or locking.
Possible causes	shoulder instability, sometimes because of hypermobility.
Shoulder symptoms	Sudden very bad pain, cannot move your arm (or it's difficult), sometimes changes shape. More common after an injury or forceful movement that causes the pain.
Possible causes	dislocated shoulder broken bone (such as the upper arm or collarbone) torn or ruptured tendon
Shoulder symptoms	Pain on top of the shoulder (where the collarbone and shoulder joint meet)
Possible causes	This could be caused by problems in the acromioclavicular joint. It could be dislocation or stretched or torn ligaments. But arthritis in this joint is more common if there has not been a recent injury.

When to get medical help for shoulder pain

A pharmacist can usually help with shoulder pain.

Ask them to suggest:

- the best painkiller – this might be tablets, or a cream or gel you rub on the skin
- other ideas for pain relief and things you can buy to help, like heat and cold packs
- seeing your GP if you need to


Talk to your GP if:

- the pain doesn't improve after 2 weeks
- it's very difficult to move your arm or shoulder
- the pain started after an injury or accident, like a fall or heavy lifting

Go to an ED or minor injuries unit if:

- the pain is sudden or very bad
- you can't move your arm
- your arm or shoulder has changed shape or is badly swollen
- you have pins and needles that do not go away
- there's no feeling in your arm or shoulder
- your arm or shoulder is hot or cold to touch

These can be signs of something serious. It could be a broken or dislocated bone, or a torn (ruptured) ligament or tendon. In rare cases it may be due to inflammation or an infection.

 [Find your nearest injury unit](#)

Treatment from a GP

A GP will examine you to work out what's causing your shoulder pain. They might send you for tests, such as an x-ray, to check the cause.

They'll suggest a treatment based on the cause, for example:

- stronger medication or injections to ease pain and swelling
- physiotherapy or exercises to do at home
- things to avoid to stop the pain getting worse or returning
- seeing a specialist for tests or treatment

Physiotherapy for shoulder pain

The number of physiotherapy sessions a GP might prescribe depends on the cause of your shoulder pain.

If you're still in pain after your sessions end, go back to your GP. They might prescribe more physiotherapy or suggest another treatment.

Engaging with a physiotherapy program and doing exercises at home can help you to avoid having surgery.

Content supplied by the [NHS](#) and adapted for Ireland by the HSE

Sláintecare.

This project has received funding from the Government of Ireland's Sláintecare Integration Fund 2019 under Grant Agreement Number 123.

Page last reviewed: 3 April 2021

Next review due: 3 April 2024

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