

Frozen shoulder

Frozen shoulder means your shoulder is painful and stiff for months, sometimes years. It can be treated with shoulder exercises and painkillers. If these treatments do not work, injections and surgery may be necessary. Surgery is rarely used for frozen shoulder.

Causes of frozen shoulder

Frozen shoulder happens when the tissue around your shoulder joint becomes inflamed.

The tissue then gets tighter and shrinks, which causes pain.

Frozen shoulder can happen because:

- you had an injury or surgery that keeps you from moving your arm normally
- you have diabetes – it's still unclear why this is but it's important to have your regular diabetes check-ups to catch any problems early

But, it's often not clear why people get a frozen shoulder.

See a GP if:

- you have shoulder pain and stiffness that does not go away – pain can be worse at night when sleeping
- the pain is so bad it makes it hard to move your arm and shoulder

Treatment from a GP

Treatment works in 3 main steps:

1. Pain relief – avoid movements that cause you pain. Only move your shoulder gently. Use paracetamol or ibuprofen to ease the pain.
2. Stronger pain and swelling relief – prescribed painkillers. Maybe steroid injections in your shoulder to bring down the swelling.
3. Getting movement back – shoulder exercises once it's less painful. This can be at home or with a physiotherapist.

Your GP might mix these treatments. This depends on how painful and stiff your shoulder is.

Stronger pain relief is usually only used for a short time because it can cause side effects.

Physiotherapy for frozen shoulder

Physiotherapy can help you get movement back in your shoulder.

Your GP will only prescribe a limited number of sessions. The exact number depends on how bad your shoulder is.

The physiotherapist will first check how much movement you have in your shoulders.

Treatments from a physiotherapist include:

- stretching exercises
- massage
- warm and cold therapy (thermotherapy)

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

Physiotherapy may not be available everywhere and waiting times can be long. You can also get physiotherapy privately.

[Find a registered physiotherapist](#)

How long frozen shoulder lasts

Frozen shoulder usually takes at least one-and-a-half to 2 years to get better. Sometimes it can be up to 5 years.

The pain and stiffness will usually go away eventually.

How you can ease the pain yourself

Do

- ✓ follow the exercises from your GP or physiotherapist
- ✓ keep an upright posture and your shoulders gently back
- ✓ move your shoulder – keeping it still will make the pain worse
- ✓ try heat or cold packs on your shoulder

Don't

- ✗ do not make up your own strenuous exercises – for example, gym equipment can make the pain worse
- ✗ do not slouch when sitting – do not roll your shoulders and bring your neck forward

Putting heat or cold packs on your shoulder

Try either of these on your shoulder:

- a pack of frozen peas wrapped in a tea towel for 5 minutes, 3 times a day
- a hot water bottle wrapped in a tea towel for 20 minutes, 2 to 3 times a day

You can also buy heat or cold packs from the pharmacy.

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

Page last reviewed: 22 March 2021

Next review due: 22 March 2024

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

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