

Rotator cuff injury: the shoulder pain signs to watch for, and how NTFGH and SGH treat and prevent it

Description

default watermark

Shoulder pain that lingers or keeps getting worse after a workout may be a rotator cuff injury, and catching it early matters because â??initial strains and sprains can progress to partial or complete tears of the rotator cuffâ?•, according to Adj Asst Prof Han Fucai, who heads the shoulder and elbow surgery division at Ng Teng Fong General Hospital (NTFGH).

The rotator cuff is a group of four muscles and their tendons that hold the shoulder steady and move the arm. It is a fairly common injury, according to SingHealthâ??s HealthXchange, and the risk rises with age. Because the tendon has a poor blood supply it wears with time, and the problem typically shows up in people above 40.

Who gets it

Overhead movement is the common thread. HealthXchange names swimmers, rowers and tennis players as being at higher risk, while Adj Asst Prof Han points to basketball, badminton and volleyball as sports that lean on the rotator cuff.

Sport is not the only cause. HealthXchangeâ??s list of causes:

- wear and tear with age, made worse by repetitive shoulder movements
- a single hard knock or a fall on the arm
- lifting or pulling something too heavy, or lifting the wrong way
- poor posture, where a slouched head and neck can pinch the tendon

It adds that something as ordinary as carrying a heavy load overhead or hanging out the washing can be enough.



Swimming is one of the overhead sports named above: Tedd Chan in the menâ??s 50m backstroke heats at the Asian Games on 21 September 2026, where he set a national record. Photo: SpexSG/Andy Chua

The signs

Adj Asst Prof Han lists pain and weakness when lifting the arm, especially above shoulder level, pain when rotating the arm, such as reaching around your back, and discomfort at night when lying on the affected shoulder.

Singapore General Hospitalâ??s orthopaedic surgery department adds reduced range of motion. HealthXchange notes that a large tear can bring constant pain and weakness, and a complete tear may leave you unable to lift the arm at all. Many people with early damage may feel nothing until an injury, such as a fall, tears the weakened tendon.

Diagnosis and treatment

Doctors start with your history and an examination. X-rays can show earlier bone injury, while an ultrasound or MRI shows whether there is a tear. SGH also uses CT arthrography.

Treatment depends on how bad the injury is. SGH starts with rest, avoiding the movements that aggravate the shoulder, painkillers and ice, and the surgeon may refer you to a physiotherapist. At NTFGH the options include physiotherapy, activity changes, painkillers, anti-inflammatories and steroid injections, with non-operative treatment generally tried for three to six months.

default watermark

If that fails, surgery is usually a keyhole (arthroscopic) repair that reattaches the tendon to the bone, though open repair is still done. Patients then wear a sling or brace and begin therapy the day after surgery, according to HealthXchange.



Gan Ching Hwee celebrates her womenâ??s 400m freestyle silver, in a national record, at the Asian Games on 22 September 2026. Photo: SpexSG/Andy Chua

Protecting your shoulder

Adj Asst Prof Hanâ??s prevention advice:

- do strengthening and stretching exercises for the shoulder muscles
- warm up the shoulder and arm properly before racquet sports and weightlifting
- rest enough between strenuous sessions
- stop any activity that brings on pain, and see a doctor if it persists

SGH adds three rules for everyday lifting: keep objects close to your body, keep lifting below shoulder level, and hold a tall spine with your ribs down and shoulders down and back. While a sore shoulder heals, NTFGH advises against carrying heavy bags on that side or loading it repeatedly overhead.

When to see a doctor

Shoulder pain that lasts more than a few days, keeps getting worse, wakes you at night or comes with weakness or trouble lifting the arm should be checked by a doctor, as should any sudden weakness after a fall. Only a doctor who has examined you can say whether it is a rotator cuff injury and which treatment suits you.

default watermark

This article is general information, not medical advice. Speak to a doctor about your own symptoms.

Date Created
24/11/2026
Author
jadeyeo