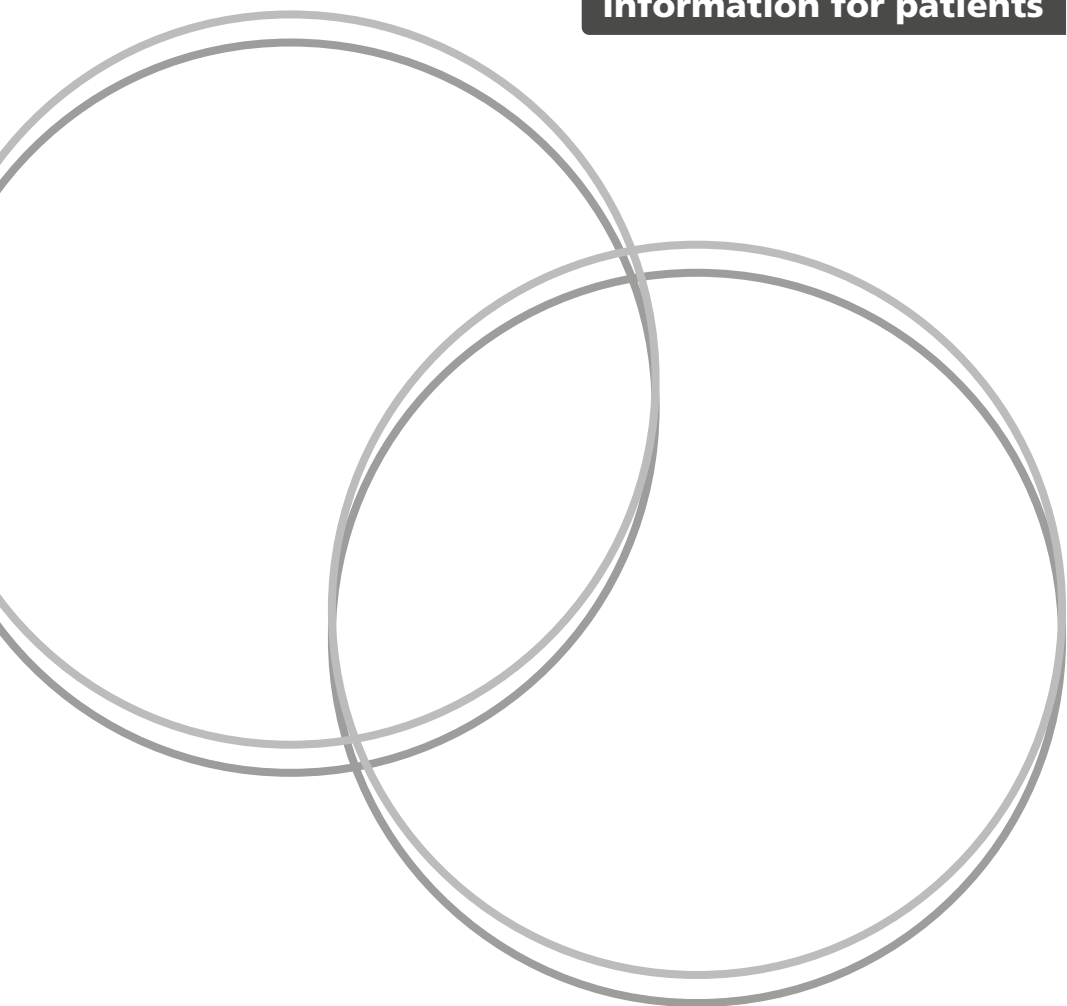


# **Rotator Cuff Tear Rehabilitation programme**

**Information for patients**



This booklet is to help you understand the problem you have with your shoulder and improve the movement and function. It is not a substitute for professional medical advice and should be used alongside any information and treatment you are given at the Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust.

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## **What is a rotator cuff tear and what can I do to help?**

A rotator cuff tear is very common and often found in people over the age of 50. Many do not know it is there and will have no problems with their shoulder at all.

Research has shown us that those who have a rotator cuff tear and shoulder pain can have a good outcome without the need for any surgery. Even though the tear remains it is possible to reduce the pain and increase the movement in your shoulder by doing certain exercises. We have found that surgery for anyone over the age of 70 is not effective due to the condition of the muscles and tendons around the shoulder joint.

### **This booklet and the exercise programme will:**

- Explain how and why it is still possible to get a good outcome without surgery.
- Reduce your shoulder pain.
- Increase the movement and strength in your shoulder.

## **What is the rotator cuff?**

- A group of four muscles and their tendons in the shoulder.
- The tendons connect muscles to bone.
- The muscles attach the shoulder blade to the arm bone.
- These muscles work with other muscles to move your shoulder joint especially when your arm is above your head or when you are lifting or carrying a weight.

# Pain management

Even though a rotator cuff tear remains, the pain in your shoulder often improves with a combination of exercise, pain relief, heat, injections and rest.

## **Try different resting positions at night;**

1. When lying on your back, place a folded towel or pillow under your upper arm.
2. When lying on your good side, place a pillow or two in front of you so that your painful arm cannot drop across your body.



3. When sitting, try propping your arm up on a cushion.



Moving your shoulder is usually the best way to try and reduce the pain and improve the movement in your arm. If you do not move your arm the situation is likely to stay the same. Try to move your arm as much as possible within what you feel is an acceptable level of pain during and after exercise. This is usually about 4 on the pain scale where 0 is no pain and 10 is the worst pain imaginable. Activities and movements that increase your pain above this level will not cause any further damage to the tendons.

## Exercises

Research has shown that exercise is effective in reducing the pain and increasing the movement in your arm.

We know it can take at least twelve weeks for the benefits of exercises to start to show. This is because the muscles around your shoulder will be weak and you will have to use them regularly over a long time to see or feel any improvement. Stopping your exercises too soon may mean that you have not given your shoulder the best chance of improvement. The exercises aim to work all of the muscles around your shoulder, not just the rotator cuff muscles. These other muscles will help to support your shoulder.

A video with these exercises can be found on the Torbay and South Devon NHS Trust website at:

[www.torbayandsouthdevon.nhs.uk/services/physiotherapy/support-videos/torbay-shoulder-exercise-programme/](http://www.torbayandsouthdevon.nhs.uk/services/physiotherapy/support-videos/torbay-shoulder-exercise-programme/)

### Disclaimer:

The information at the link above was reviewed by the author of this leaflet in October 2025. Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust is not responsible for the content or reliability of the website accessed through this link.

# Stretching exercises

These gentle exercises will help to improve the movement in your arm.

## Remember

- Do the exercises once or twice a day
- If you have discomfort, keep the pain at a manageable level (around 4 out of 10).

## Shoulder Roll Exercise

- Sit or stand
- Keep your arms relaxed by your sides
- Roll your shoulders forwards
- Roll shoulders backwards
- Relax
- Repeat 5 times



## Elbow Exercise

- Stand up.
- Straighten your arm down by your side, palm facing forwards.
- Bend your elbow bringing your hand up towards your shoulder.
- Straighten your elbow.
- Repeat 5 times.





## Worktop Slides

- Sit or stand facing a flat surface at waist height e.g. a table or work surface.
- Place both hands on a small towel.
- Gently push the towel forwards as far as feels comfortable with both hands.
- Return to the start position by sliding back.
- As you repeat, try and stretch further forwards.
- Repeat 5 times.



## Stair rail slides

- Stand facing your stairs.
- Place the hand on your affected side on a towel on the stair rail.
- Take a step forwards and at the same time slide the towel up the stair rail.
- Slide the towel back down as you take a step backwards.
- As you repeat, try and stretch further up.
- Repeat 5 times.



## **Strengthening exercises**

These exercises can be carried out along with the stretching exercises shown previously.

The following exercises aim to strengthen the muscles around your shoulder and will help reduce pain with daily activities. They will start with the easier ones at the beginning, becoming more difficult as you improve.

It is a good sign if the exercise feels difficult or the arm is difficult to control. It means that the muscles are working and will be getting stronger. We would encourage you to keep going with them as they will slowly get stronger over a long period of time.

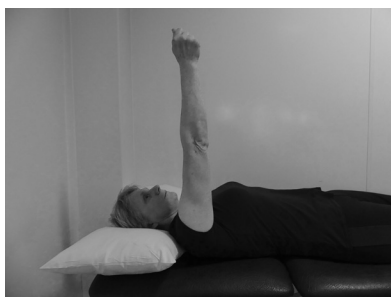
As the exercises become easier try the next one, or do them in a different position, firstly in sitting and then in standing.

The number of repetitions is given as a guide only. You may find that your muscles get tired and that you will have to slowly build up the number of times you can do each exercise. For example start with 3-5 repetitions. Sensations of hard work, stiffness and muscle ache are all expected and will tend to improve over 6-8 weeks.

It is best if you do these exercises once every day. You will need to do them at least four times a week to make a difference.

## Elbow bend and straighten

- Lie on your back with your knees bent, feet flat (on the floor or your bed), and a pillow under your head.
- Bend the elbow on your affected side to 90 degrees. Lift your affected arm upwards so that the elbow is pointing to the ceiling. Use your unaffected arm to help if needed.
- Keeping your upper arm still, straighten your elbow, so your fingers point to the ceiling and then bend it to 90 degrees again.
- Repeat 5 times.



## Arm swaying exercise



- Get into the starting position with the arm up in front of you, let go with the good arm. You may need to experiment with your elbow or hand in different positions to find the 'best route' for you to get your arm overhead. There is not a right or wrong way. If you find a good way to get your arm up overhead then continue to do it like that.
- Gently sway your arm backwards and forwards a small distance.
- Repeat 10 times.
- Rest your arm down.

## External rotation with theraband

- Lie on your back with your knees bent, feet flat (on the floor or your bed), and a pillow under your head.
- Place a folded towel under your upper arm (between your elbow and your shoulder) on the affected side.
- Bend your elbows to right angles holding one end of the resistance band in each hand.
- Take your hand on the affected side out to the side and control back to the middle.
- Repeat this 5 times.



# Sitting and Standing Exercises

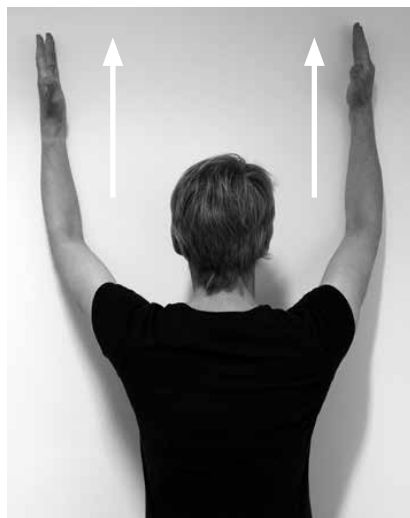
## Armpit squeezes

- In sitting, place a folded towel under the arm pit of your affected arm.
- Keep your elbow bent.
- Gently squeeze the towel into your side. Hold the squeeze for 5 seconds.
- Relax.
- Repeat 3-5 times.



## Wall Slides

- Stand facing the wall.
- Slide your affected hand up the wall supporting and helping it with your good arm.
- Some people find it helpful to bend your knees a little and then straighten them as this helps to slide your arm up the wall.
- Stretch your hand up as high as is comfortable then slide it down. If it is painful lowering your arm, try resisting the movement so that you are pushing down against the pressure of the other arm. Over a period of weeks you may find that you can gradually reduce the amount of resistance that you are giving.
- Repeat 10 times and build up to 30 repetitions.
- Progress this exercise by reducing the help given by your good arm. Eventually try and slide your arm up and down the wall with no help. You could also try lifting your hand off the wall when the arm is overhead.

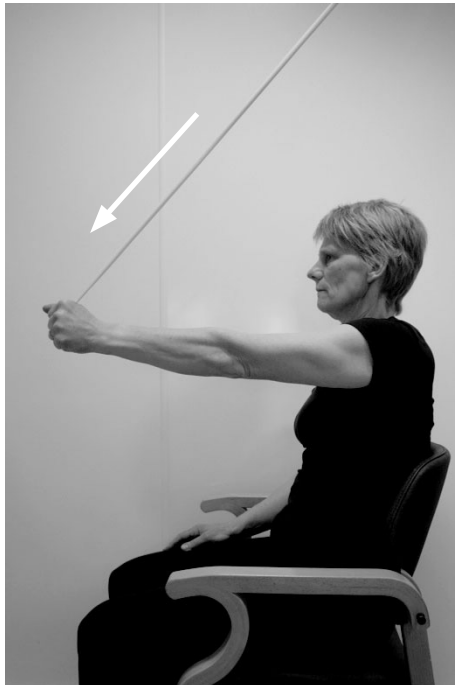




## Band Pull Downs

You can do this exercise sitting or standing. You will need a piece of resistance band to complete this exercise and will be advised by your physiotherapist whether this is appropriate for you.

- Tie your band to a firm point, for example a banister rail high up behind you, so that when sitting or standing with your back to the tied band, your arm can move above your head and in front of you.
- Hold the end of the band in your hand on the affected arm and pull down towards the floor.
- Slowly, let your arm come back up over your head.
- Repeat 10 times and aim to build up to 30 repetitions.



## Using your arm for daily activities

We expect that by working through this rehabilitation programme, the pain in your shoulder will ease and the movement and strength will improve.

Whilst following the exercise programme it is important to continue to use your arm for daily activities.

These daily activities may cause some pain but should be at a level of pain that is acceptable during or after the activity.

You may find these daily activities will become easier to do. Please continue with your exercises.

It may be that you still have a restriction to some movements, and you may need to continue to modify your lifestyle.

However, if you have completed these exercises for at least twelve weeks they will have helped to strengthen the muscles around your shoulder.

If you have found these exercises helpful you may wish to do these on a regular basis.

## Contact Details

If you have any problems or questions at any stage in your rehabilitation, please ask your physiotherapist for advice.

### **Nuffield Orthopaedic Centre**

Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust  
Windmill Road  
Headington  
Oxford  
OX3 7LD

Nuffield Orthopaedic Centre Physiotherapy Reception:  
**01865 738 074**

### **Trauma Service**

John Radcliffe Hospital  
Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust  
Headley way  
Oxford  
OX3 9DU

John Radcliffe Trauma Service Physiotherapy Reception:  
**01865 221 540**

### **Horton General Hospital**

Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust  
Oxford Road  
Banbury  
OX16 9AL

Physiotherapy Reception:  
**01295 229432**

## Further information

If you would like an interpreter, please speak to the department where you are being seen.

Please also tell them if you would like this information in another format, such as:

- Easy Read
- large print
- braille
- audio
- electronic
- another language.

We have tried to make the information in this leaflet meet your needs. If it does not meet your individual needs or situation, please speak to your healthcare team. They are happy to help.

Author: Physiotherapy Outpatient Department, Nuffield Orthopaedic Centre  
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Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust  
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