

## Don't 'shoulder' the burden of shoulder pain

By Teddi Nicolaus

**Y**our shoulder hurts and you don't know why. You can't think of anything you did to cause the pain, but the constant aching is keeping you from getting a good night's sleep. Sound familiar?

If you feel like you're carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders, you're not alone. About 25% of us struggle with shoulder pain at any point in time, making it the third most common orthopedic complaint after back pain and knee pain.

As you get older, the likelihood you'll develop shoulder ailments increases, thanks to a lifetime of wear and tear. The genes you inherit from your parents also play an important role, as does your occupation. Jobs that require workers to repeatedly lift heavy objects or work with their arms raised above their heads, such as painters, carpenters and electricians, are at greater risk for shoulder problems. Athletes are particularly susceptible, especially when the activity involves repetitive overhead motions, such as tennis and swimming.

"Shoulder pain is very common," says Patrick Denard, MD, a shoulder specialist in Medford, Oregon. "The best thing you can do is try to maintain your mobility and strength, particularly as you age."

The shoulder is the most mobile and complex joint in your body. Along with its many tendons, muscles, ligaments and bones, the

shoulder allows for a wide range of motion in your arm. From drying your hair to reaching for a cup in the cabinet, strong and healthy shoulders are essential for a lot of the tasks you perform each day. But aside from matters of fashion or physique, you might not give much thought to your shoulders until something goes wrong. The shoulder's amazing flexibility is also what makes it more vulnerable to a range of problems.



### Shouldering the pain

"The most common shoulder problem we see is rotator cuff tears, and about 50% of people at age 65 have a full-thickness rotator cuff tear," Denard says. "That in itself gives you a lot of information from the perspective of the cause. Most of it is related to age and genetics."

The rotator cuff is a group of muscles and tendons that stabilize the shoulder and help move your arm. Most tears are the result of the tendons wearing down over time. Nearly 2 million Americans visit their doctors each year because of rotator cuff tears.

Other common shoulder problems include arthritis, bursitis, tendinitis and frozen shoulder. Traumatic shoulder issues, such as fractures and dislocations, can be caused by a fall or blow.

Poor posture and sitting for long periods at a computer can also cause shoulder pain. Good ergonomics, such as choosing the right kind of chair, can help you and your joints stay comfortable and happy while you work.

"I encourage people to sit up straight and maintain their posture," Denard says. "I see people who have shoulder pain that's in the upper back from being hunched over a lot. We are meant to be beings that are moving, and when you put us behind a desk in a technologically advanced world, we can develop problems because we didn't evolve to be there."

Fortunately, the majority of patients with shoulder pain will respond to simple treatment methods such as



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rest, altering their activities, medication, and exercise or physical therapy to help improve shoulder strength and flexibility.

### Giving pain the cold shoulder

You rely on your shoulders for just about everything you do each day, so it's important to take care of them. Here are a few tips to keep you healthy.

- ◆ Don't lift heavy objects over your head unless you have to. Putting luggage in an overhead bin on a plane, for example, can invite a rotator cuff problem.

- ◆ Warm up before lifting that laundry basket. Two minutes of marching in place while swinging your arms can keep your shoulder muscles and tendons flexible and less likely to tear.

- ◆ Clear the decks. Slips and falls can lead to shoulder injuries. Clear anything around the house that might be a tripping hazard, such as cords, wires and clutter.

- ◆ Avoid slumping. Good posture can help keep unneeded stress off your shoulders and help prevent pain.

- ◆ Switch it up. Vary which side you carry your purse or laptop bag on. Consider switching to a backpack to evenly distribute the weight, but don't overload it.

- ◆ Get stronger! Strength training is one of the best tools for promoting shoulder health, Denard says. Strengthening the muscles that surround your shoulder can increase stability and mobility and ease chronic pain. Your doctor or physical therapist can recommend a program tailored to your needs.



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