Rotator Cuff Tears

Exercises

The rotator cuff is a group of muscles around the shoulder. The rotator cuff muscles arise from the shoulder blade and attach at the top of the arm (humerus). The rotator cuff muscles may tear due to repetition and prolonged use or due to wear and tear (natural ageing process). It may be difficult to lift the arm above shoulder height when the rotator cuff muscles are torn. Large rotator cuff tears are often not repairable. Large tears can be managed very well with an exercise programme.

The deltoid muscle is on the upper aspect of your arm. The deltoid can be strengthened to support the rotator cuff. Strengthening the deltoid may reduce your pain and may help improve your range of movement e.g. when lifting your arm when reaching into a cupboard.

Strengthening the deltoid muscle will take at least 12 to 24 weeks. The exercises need to be performed every day.

Exercise One

Lie down on your back on a mat or a firm mattress supported by a pillow.

- Bend your elbow and then raise your arm to 90 degrees until your elbow is vertical (your elbow should be straight in line with your shoulder).
- When your arm is at 90 degrees straighten your elbow. Depending on pain or weakness you may need to support your elbow with your stronger arm.
- Bend your elbow and return to the starting position.

Repeat this exercise until the muscles feel tired or you experience pain. Only progress to exercise number two when you are able to do exercise number one easily. This may take two to three weeks.

Exercise Two

Lie down on your back on a mat or a firm mattress supported by a pillow.

- Raise your arm to 90 degrees until your elbow is vertical (your elbow should be straight in line with your shoulder)
- slowly move the whole arm in small circular movements (clockwise and anticlockwise). You may need to support your elbow with your strong arm.
- Repeat this exercise until the muscles feel tired or you experience pain.

The exercise can be altered by moving the arm forwards and backwards or from side to side.

Only progress to exercise number three when you are able to do exercise number two easily. It may take a few weeks to be able to do this exercise easily.

Continue to do the exercise until the muscles feel tired (fatigued). Try to build up the time you are exercising over a period of weeks. You may only be able to carry out this exercise for 15 -30 seconds. Gradually increase the number of repetitions over two to three weeks**. If you find this exercise too painful or difficult go back to exercise number one for a week or two. When the muscles are feeling stronger try exercise number two again.**

Exercise Three (With or Without Weight)

Progress exercise number three by adding a weight. You will need a tin of beans or a ½ to 1kg dumbbell.

- Lie down on your back on a mat or a firm mattress supported by a pillow. Hold the weight in your weak hand. Raise your arm to 90 degrees until your elbow is vertical (your elbow should be straight in line with your shoulder) .
- Then lower your arm to your side.

Repeat until the muscles feel tired (fatigued) or pain. If you find this exercise too painful or difficult try carrying out the exercise without a weight or try a lighter weight or go back to exercise number two for a week or two.

When the muscles are starting to feel stronger try exercise number three again. Gradually increase the number of repetitions over two to three weeks.

Only progress to exercise number four when you are able to do exercise number three easily.

If these exercises are too difficult you could support your arm using your other hand.

Exercise Four

Change your position from lying down to sitting up approximately 30 degrees (long sitting – semi reclined position). Either put some pillows behind your back or use a reclining chair.

- Repeat exercise number three but without a weight.
- Raise your arm to 90 degrees until your elbow is vertical (your elbow should be straight in line with your shoulder) and then
- Lower your arm to your side. You may need to support your elbow with your strong arm.

Repeat until the muscles feel tired (fatigued) or pain.

If you find this exercise too painful or difficult repeat exercise number three until your pain settles down or your muscles start to feel stronger. Gradually increase the number of repetitions over two to three weeks.

Only progress to exercise number five when you are able to do exercise number four easily.

Exercise Five

Sitting up approximately 30 degrees (long sitting – semi reclined position). Either put some pillows behind your back or if use a reclining chair.

- Repeat exercise number four but now hold a weight 1/2kg to 1kg or a tin of beans. Raise your arm to 90 degrees until your elbow is vertical (your elbow should be straight in line with your shoulder) and then
- Lower your arm to your side. You may need to support your elbow with your strong arm. Repeat until the muscles feel tired (fatigued) or pain.

If you find this exercise too painful or difficult repeat exercise number four until your pain settles down or your muscles start to feel stronger. Gradually increase the number of repetitions over two to three weeks. .

Only progress to exercise number six when you are able to do exercise number five easily.

Exercise Six

Progress exercise number five to standing. You may wish to stand against a wall to support your upper back and shoulder blades.

Try the exercise without a weight and when the muscles feel stronger or the pain has to started to settle down you may wish to add a weight ½ to 1 kg or a tin of beans. You may need to support your elbow with your strong arm.

Gradually increase the number of repetitions over two to three weeks. When the exercises feel easy, you may be able to increase the weight to two kgs.

Exercise Seven

In standing place your forearm against the wall. Push your hand into the wall. Whilst pushing your hand into the wall and slide your hand up the wall.