

Looking After Your Shoulders Following Spinal Cord Injury

SPINAL INJURIES UNIT

Ph: 3176 2737

Fax: 3176 7462

OUTPATIENT DEPARTMENT

Ph: 3176 2641

Fax: 3176 5644

Postal and Location

Princess Alexandra Hospital
Ipswich Rd
Woolloongabba QLD 4102
AUSTRALIA

TRANSITIONAL REHABILITATION PROGRAM

Ph: 3176 9508

Fax: 3176 9514

Email

trp@health.qld.gov.au

Postal

PO Box 6053
Buranda, QLD, 4102

Location

3rd Floor, Centro Buranda
Cnr Cornwall St & Ipswich Rd
Buranda, QLD, 4102
AUSTRALIA

SPINAL OUTREACH TEAM

Ph: 3176 9507

Freecall 1800 624 832
(for regional clients)

Fax: 3176 9514

Email

spot@health.qld.gov.au

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Shoulder pain is a common complaint for people with spinal cord injury. There are generally two main types of shoulder pain:

Neuropathic Pain as a result of the damage to nerves leading in and out of the spinal cord. It can be felt at above, below or at the level of your injury. It is most often described as sharp, shooting, electric, burning or stabbing. Neuropathic pain may be controlled by medication prescribed by a doctor.

Musculoskeletal pain as a result of damage, overuse or general wear and tear of joints, ligaments, muscles and bones. It is normally described as dull or aching, is worse with activities and eased by rest. This pain is normally felt above the level of injury.

This fact sheet is about:

1. Preventing musculoskeletal shoulder pain
2. Managing musculoskeletal shoulder pain if it does occur

Why Might I Get Shoulder Pain?

- ◆ Extra work placed on shoulders for transferring, pushing a wheelchair and lifting legs speeds up wear and tear
- ◆ Poor technique with these activities adds even further strain
- ◆ Poor posture in the chair leads to stiffness in the joints and tightness in the muscles of the neck and shoulder. This puts the shoulder joint at a disadvantage making movement more difficult and increasing the risk of damage to the shoulder
- ◆ Unstable shoulders cause extra strain. This instability may be caused by:
 - muscle imbalance in people with only some muscles of the shoulder working
 - prolonged bed rest causes muscles that stabilise the shoulder to switch off
 - muscle weakness and imbalance that builds up over time due to poor posture, poor movement techniques and insufficient activity
- ◆ Continuous and repetitive use of the shoulder muscles can lead to 'overuse' of the muscles, tendons or the joint itself
- ◆ As you get older all of these factors will have an even bigger effect

How Could Shoulder Pain Affect Me?

- ◆ Make it harder to push a wheelchair
- ◆ Make it difficult to transfer so help is needed with or without a hoist
- ◆ Make it harder to look after yourself e.g. dress, comb your hair and reach for things



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- ◆ Make it uncomfortable in bed at night leading to loss of sleep. If this leads to sleeping in only one or two positions the risk of pressure areas increases
- ◆ It may be necessary to give up sport or work
- ◆ You may feel frustrated, defeated and exhausted by the effect of pain on everything

How Can I Prevent Shoulder Pain

- ◆ Warm-up and stretch shoulders before transferring or pushing in the morning
- ◆ Plan your day '**economising**' the number of transfers you do. Shoulders aren't really designed to support our body weight, so keep transfers to a minimum
- ◆ Be certain to transfer and wheel your chair using the best technique possible
- ◆ Exercise your shoulders and neck to be as strong, stable and flexible as possible
- ◆ Keep your body weight in check
- ◆ Increase your level of activity or exercise program gradually – your shoulders need time to get used to new activities or demands that you are placing on them
- ◆ If playing sport avoid '**overuse**' of your shoulders. Build up your training slowly and use a variety of training activities to alter the demands placed on your shoulders
- ◆ Check your posture in your wheelchair using a mirror. If possible, your ear, shoulder, hip joint and the axle of your wheelchair should make a straight line to the floor. If you wheelchair, cushion and backrest are set up properly and in good condition you will sit comfortably in this position
- ◆ When doing computer work be sure your workstation is set up so that you can maintain this posture. Remember to take regular breaks
- ◆ For some activities such as eating, you may need to adjust your position to balance. When you have finished, be sure to sit yourself back into a good posture
- ◆ As you age, be willing to accept help from others, so that you preserve your shoulders over the long term

What do I do if I get Shoulder Pain?

- ◆ Check you are doing everything listed above to prevent and manage shoulder pain
- ◆ Modify or do less of what is causing the pain, until you get rid of it. This may mean getting extra personal help or using a hoist and slideboard.
- ◆ See a therapist for treatment and advice

Remember, shoulders don't have to be a pain...

Prevention is better than cure

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