



A GUIDE TO
**ROTATOR CUFF
INJURIES**



O'GRADY
ORTHOPAEDICS

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If you recently suffered a rotator cuff injury or have had a torn rotator cuff in the past, you know how painful it can be. Not only is it frustrating, but it can prevent you from doing the things that you have to do – like work, or things that you love to do – like playing sports and living an active lifestyle.

If you fall into any of these categories, or are looking for tips to prevent a rotator cuff injury, then this guide is for you. As always, Dr. O'Grady is happy to answer any questions you have about torn rotator cuffs. Keep reading to learn more about rotator cuff injuries including the symptoms, common treatment methods, and preventive measures you can take to avoid them.

OVERVIEW OF ROTATOR CUFF INJURIES

The rotator cuff is comprised of four tendons that are fused together and cover the top, front, and back of the humeral head, or the ball, of the shoulder. These tendons enable the shoulder to move. Being that the shoulder is the most mobile joint in the body, the rotator cuff is susceptible to injuries. The tendons can fray, and with continued use, they can tear completely.

There are two different types of rotator cuff tears:

1. Partial tears, which result from aging, weakness, or overuse of the tendon. The tendon starts to separate from the bone but it is not completely severed from it.
2. Full-thickness tears, or complete tears, occur when the tear is severe enough that it completely separates from the bone. Part or all of the rotator cuff tendon is completely detached from the head of the shoulder.

SYMPTOMS

The symptoms of a torn rotator cuff include one or more of the following:

- Pain in the shoulder, especially when lifting or lowering the arm, or while lying on the affected shoulder.
- Weakness in the affected arm, especially when lifting and rotating the arm.
- Locking of the shoulder.
- A crackling sensation when the shoulder is moved in certain positions.
- Feeling like the shoulder is “catching”.
- A feeling of instability in the shoulder.

When a tear occurs suddenly, such as when falling on an outstretched hand, the pain can be searing. You may also feel a “snapping” sensation and experience immediate weakness in the upper arm.

Tears that develop gradually also cause pain and weakness; however the pain and weakness progresses as the injury worsens.





CAUSES AND RISK FACTORS

There are certain risk factors that can increase your chance of sustaining damage to the rotator cuff. These risk factors include:

- **Age.** As you age, your risk for injuring the rotator cuff increases. Torn rotator cuffs are the more common in people ages 35 and older.
- **Participation in certain sports.** Repetitive arm motions, especially above the head and behind the back, increase the chances of a rotator cuff injury. Athletes who regularly perform such actions, such as golfers, baseball pitchers, archers, swimmers, surfers, and tennis players are highly susceptible to this type of injury.
- **Performing manual labor.** People who perform manual labor that requires repetitive overhead movements, are more prone to tearing their rotator cuff. Construction workers, house painters, firefighters, and law-enforcement officials have an increased risk of this type of injury.
- **Genetics.** You may be at an increased risk of suffering this injury if torn rotator cuffs are common in your family.

PREVENTION

If you have an increased risk of injuring your rotator cuff, you'll be happy to know that there are certain measures that can be taken to prevent damaging these tendons.

Preventative measures include:

- **Maintain good posture**
- **Avoid keeping your arms outstretched at the sides or raised above the head for prolonged periods of time;** while painting a ceiling, or while installing sheetrock for a new roof, for example.
- **Do exercises:** There are certain exercises that can strengthen the rotator cuff, thus preventing an injury from occurring. Exercises that are effective include:
 - Internal rotations on a cable tower. Your lifting arm should be closest to the cable machine, and your elbow should be held at a 90-degree angle. Rotate your extended hand from outside to inside, so that you are bringing your hand towards your belly.
 - External rotations on a cable tower. Stand so that your lifting arm is furthest away from the cable machine. Hold your elbow at a 90-degree angle and rotate your hand outwards, from your abdomen.
 - Scaption, or scapular plane elevation, at a cable machine. Lift your arm upwards so that it is on 30-degree angle ahead of the frontal plane. Avoid lifting your shoulder blade up towards your ear.

[View Exercises](#)

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO HAVE A CONSULTATION?

If you are experiencing any of the symptoms of a torn rotator cuff, you should seek medical treatment as soon as possible. A consultation with a medical professional who specializes in rotator cuff tears, such as an orthopedic surgeon, will provide you with a proper diagnosis and allow you to receive proper treatment.

During the consultation, Dr. O'Grady will perform a number of exams to determine if your pain is actually from a torn rotator cuff, or if the cause is something else. He will determine the severity of the tear and what type of treatment will be the most effective.

- **History and physical exam.** The consultation will begin with your doctor taking a full medical history, and performing a physical exam. Specific elements of your history and your physical exam will allow your doctor to determine how to further diagnose your condition.
- **X-rays.** Dr. O'Grady may order an X-ray so that he can assess the presence of arthritis and bone spurs.
- **MRI scan.** This type of imaging exam will provide Dr. O'Grady with a more accurate view of your muscles and tendons, allowing him to actually see if they are torn, and to what extent.

While x-rays and MRI's are valuable diagnostic tools, the history and physical exam are the most crucial elements for evaluating the cause of your shoulder pain.

[Request a Consultation](#)

NON-SURGICAL TREATMENTS

When properly diagnosed, the majority of rotator cuff tears and pain in the shoulder can be successfully treated without surgery. Non-surgical treatment options usually include one or more of the following:

- **Rest.** Resting the shoulder and limiting the amount of overhead activities you participate in can help to ease the pain. After an injury you may be prescribed a sling for a short amount of time in order to minimize the pain in the shoulder until you can be properly evaluated by an orthopedic surgeon.
- **Modified activities.** Dr. O'Grady will suggest that you avoid participating in activities that cause pain in the shoulder. Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medications. Over-the-counter medications, such as naproxen sodium and ibuprofen, can help to reduce swelling and pain.
- **Strengthening exercises.** Certain exercises can help to strengthen the shoulder and restore movement. Exercises will include a variety of stretches, which will improve flexibility, as well as range of motion. Exercises that strengthen the muscles will relieve pain and prevent further injuries from occurring.
- **Steroid injections.** When the above-mentioned methods do not work, a cortisone injection can help to relieve the pain and reduce the swelling





WHEN SURGICAL TREATMENT IS REQUIRED: ARTHROSCOPIC SURGERY

When the rotator cuff is completely torn, it will not heal on its own. The majority of these will require surgery. Arthroscopic surgery is the preferred surgical treatment for repairing a torn rotator cuff for a number of reasons, including:

- **It is less invasive.**
- **There is less post-operative pain.**
- **There is less scarring.**
- **The initial recovery time can be faster than traditional open surgery.**

Other benefits of arthroscopy surgery include:

- **It is always outpatient surgery, which means that the surgery is performed, and the patient returns home in the same day.**
- **There are a limited number of stitches to remove.**
- **There are less wound complications.**
- **Additional problems can be identified and treated even if they were not discovered on exam or MRI.**

Arthroscopic surgery involves a series of small one cm incisions. Because they can see the tear from different angles, orthopaedic surgeons who are experienced with performing arthroscopic surgery are better able to assess the damage. This also allows them to see any other problems that may exist, and fix those problems during the same surgery.

Some patients will receive general anesthesia but most will receive regional anesthesia (your arm and shoulder will be numbed, and medicine that will make you sleepy will be administered) prior to surgery. During arthroscopic surgery, the torn tendon of the rotator cuff will be repaired back onto the humerus. Dr. O'Grady is always keeping current with, and helping to develop, the latest techniques in arthroscopic rotator cuff repair including the use of rotator cuff patches and better ways to control post-operative pain.

WHAT TO EXPECT IN RECOVERY FROM ARTHROSCOPIC SURGERY

To make your recovery as quick and as painless as possible, following the aftercare instructions provide by your doctor is imperative.

This includes:

- **Keeping the shoulder as still as possible immediately after the surgery, for up to six weeks. Wearing a sling will protect the repair and will be worn for anywhere between four and six weeks depending on the size of the tear.**
- **The sling is usually worn while performing daily tasks, and while sleeping. It can be removed while you showering and getting dressed, and during light activities with your physical therapist; however, you will be unable to use the arm during the first three weeks for most activities.**
- **Visiting your orthopaedic surgeon for a three week post-operative appointment.**
- **Attending physical therapy sessions once your doctor deems that it is safe to do so. Physical therapy will include both passive and active exercises, but also will dramatically help minimize pain and swelling.**
- **Performing strength building exercises, which will begin three to six months after surgery.**

A complete recovery from arthroscopic surgery generally takes up to between 3-6 months depending on the size of the tear, and it may take up to one year for full strength to return.



MEET DR. O'GRADY

Dr. Christopher O'Grady, a Board Certified Orthopaedic Surgeon, holds a Certificate of Added Qualifications in Sports Medicine. Dr. O'Grady treats conditions of the musculoskeletal system, which result from injury and excessive use, as well as arthritis. Christopher O'Grady, MD. earned his undergraduate degree in physics at Georgetown University.

He then continued his education at Georgetown, earning his medical degree in 1997. Dr. O'Grady completed his orthopaedic training at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine on Long Island. His internship and residency were completed at Long Island Jewish Medical Center. After completing his residency Dr. O'Grady was assigned to active duty at the Naval Hospital Pensacola where he proudly served as an orthopedic surgeon for more than four years. He also served as an orthopaedic consultant for the Blue Angels while he was on active duty. Dr. O'Grady was awarded the honorable American Orthopaedic Association's Zimmer Award for Orthopaedic Research.

Dr. O'Grady has also consulted with NASA, where he helped develop a plan to prevent shoulder injuries in astronauts. He is also an Associate-Master Instructor at the Orthopaedic Learning Center in Chicago, where has taught courses on shoulder instability, and on the preservation of cartilage in knee injuries. Additionally, Dr. O'Grady serves as an instructor for the Arthroscopy Association of North America, where he focuses on the latest advances in surgical techniques. Dr. O'Grady's specializes in arthroscopic shoulder surgery, shoulder reconstruction, and shoulder replacement surgery. He also has a special interest in treating athletes of all ages, and provides the same expert treatment for non-athletes. Dr. O'Grady is very involved with his own three children and enjoys coaching them in several different sports. This has provided him with years of experience with sports-related injuries in players ranging from children to weekend warriors to the pros.

NEXT STEPS

Still have questions about rotator cuff injuries, or any other musculoskeletal condition resulting from arthritis, injury, or overuse? Dr. O'Grady would be happy to consult with you. Simply give us a call or request a consultation. At O'Grady Orthopaedics in Gulf Breeze, Florida, we want to help you return to the things you have to do, and the things you love to do, pain free.

[Request a Consultation](#)