



Sara Gordon & Associates

Physiotherapy Newsletter

Frozen Shoulder

What is Frozen Shoulder?

Adhesive Capsulitis is the medical term for Frozen Shoulder. This is a condition which affects the ability to move the shoulder, and usually only occurs on one side.

The medical term literally describes what is seen in this condition – adhesive meaning sticky, and capsulitis meaning inflammation of the joint capsule. It is thought that a lot of the symptoms are due to the capsule becoming inflamed and 'sticking', making the joint stiff and difficult to move. This is not the same as arthritis, and no other joints are usually affected.

Frozen Shoulder is almost always found in the 40+ age group, usually in the 40-70 age range. Approximately 3% of the population will be affected by this, with slightly higher incidence amongst women, and five times higher incidence in diabetics.

What causes it?

It is not known exactly what causes this problem, however it is thought that the joint capsule becomes inflamed, which causes scar tissue to form. This leaves less room for the humerus (arm bone) to move, hence restricting the movement of the joint.

Hormonal changes may be responsible for the higher incidence amongst women, particularly due to the increased prevalence around the menopausal period.

It has been noted that that poor posture, particularly rounded shoulders may also contribute to this condition. Also, prolonged immobility (such as after a fracture) may cause this condition to develop.

How Do I know if I've got a Frozen Shoulder?

This condition has been described in three phases, so the symptoms will differ depending on the phase of the condition

The Painful Phase

- Gradual onset of aching shoulder
- Developing widespread pain, often worst at night and when lying on the affected side
- This phase can last anywhere between 2-9 months

The Stiffening Phase

- Stiffness starts to become a problem
- Pain level usually does not alter
- Difficulty with normal daily tasks such as dressing, preparing food, carrying bags, working
- Muscle wastage may be evident due to lack of use
- This stage can last between 4-12 months

The Thawing Phase

- Gradual improvement in range of movement
- Gradual decrease in pain, although it may re-appear as stiffness eases
- This stage can last between 5-12 months

What can I do?

See your doctor or physiotherapist if you think you may have this condition, as early intervention can prevent severe stiffness

Take any painkillers that are prescribed as a reduced pain level will help you to move your shoulder. By trying to keep the shoulder moving – even if it is just small pendular movements, you will help to resolve the problem more quickly.

What can a physiotherapist do?

- Gentle stretches to the capsule and surrounding soft tissue
- Spinal mobilisations often help the range of movement too.
- An exercise programme to do at home
- Pain relieving treatments such as acupuncture or electrotherapy

