

# Injuries to the Shoulder: When should you worry?

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Injuries to the shoulder are common. Virtually everyone will suffer an injury to the shoulder at some point in his or her lifetime. Most of these injuries are minor and heal with simple or no treatment. Some injuries are more complex and require medical attention. Differentiating minor and serious injuries can occasionally be difficult and can require the help of your doctor.

The shoulder consists of three bones: the humerus (upper arm bone), the scapula (shoulder blade), and the clavicle (collarbone). The top of the humerus is rounded to form a ball shape, and the side of the scapula forms a shallow socket called the glenoid. This ball and socket form the major joint of the shoulder. The other main joint of the shoulder is called the acromioclavicular joint (A-C joint), where the clavicle meets the part of the scapula called the acromion. This joint can easily be felt directly on top of the shoulder at the end of the collarbone. The main ball and socket joint is more difficult to feel as it is covered by a joint capsule lining, four rotator cuff muscles, and the deltoid muscle.

Like all bones, the bones around the shoulder can be broken (fractured), and these injuries are often very painful. They can occur after a simple fall, a direct blow, or after a car, bicycle, or motorcycle accident. The breaks most often occur around the ball of the humerus and the clavicle. Patients complain of significant pain, swelling, bruising,

and often cannot move the arm. Patients with collarbone fractures often note a bump on top of the shoulder that is very tender to touch. Fractures of the scapula are less common and usually occur after motor vehicle accidents. Most fractures about the shoulder heal well without any type of surgery, but they all do require medical attention to ensure proper healing.

Occasionally when the shoulder is injured, the bones don't break but instead separate from each other, or dislocate. Dislocation of the main ball-and-socket part of the shoulder joint is fairly common and often occurs after a fall or during contact sports. When this happens, patients experience pain, cannot move the arm, and often note that the shoulder does not look "right." This requires immediate medical attention so that the ball of the shoulder can be placed back in the socket (reduced), usually with the help of some intravenous medication. Some patients do well after the shoulder is reduced, while others suffer from recurrent episodes of dislocation. These patients are often the younger ones (under 25 years of age), and sometimes require surgery to correct the



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problem. Dislocation of the smaller (A-C) joint on top of the shoulder is also common and is often referred to as a shoulder separation. The term "shoulder separation" is a bit of a misnomer, as the main ball-and-socket joint of the shoulder is not involved in this injury. These also occur after falls and contact sports. They are also painful and can also result in a deformity on top of the shoulder. Most of these injuries are treated with rest, but sometimes require a surgery to repair.

Injuries to the muscles of the shoulder are also common and often result in pain and loss of function of the shoulder. The ball-and-socket joint of the shoulder is covered by group of four muscles collectively known as the rotator cuff. This rotator cuff is in turn covered by a large muscle called the deltoid. While serious deltoid injuries are unusual, rotator cuff injuries are not. They can occur suddenly after a fall or accident, or can occur over time from repetitive use of the shoulder. Patients with rotator cuff tears often complain of pain and weakness with overhead activities and heavy lifting as well as pain that interrupts sleeping. Rotator cuff injuries vary from mild inflammation known as tendonitis to complete tears of the rotator cuff. Most rotator cuff

problems respond to simple treatment such as rest, pain medication, stretching and strengthening exercises, and sometimes an injection of medicine to reduce inflammation. Some rotator cuff injuries are more serious and require surgery.

Specific questions about your shoulder injury can be answered by an orthopaedic surgeon. Important information you can expect to gain includes the nature and severity of the injury as well as the treatment options and plan. You can also get an estimate of the amount of time it will take before you are fully improved, which can be prolonged in certain cases. Finally, you can get an idea of the final outcome that is expected and any potential complications or problems that can occur in the future.

*For more information about this article or if you have other orthopedic questions, you can contact Dr. Hoffman at Chatham Orthopaedics, 4425 Paulsen Street, Savannah, GA 31405 or call him at (912) 355-6615.*