

# Shoulder Pain

## Patient Information Leaflet

MSK Musculoskeletal Physiotherapy Service



View our other **MSK Physiotherapy** resources

[www.leicspart.nhs.uk/msk-physiotherapy-resources-getting-started/](http://www.leicspart.nhs.uk/msk-physiotherapy-resources-getting-started/)

## What causes shoulder pain?

Shoulder pain is very common. Around 1 in 3 adults will experience shoulder pain at some point in their life. Some people feel it more often. Even though it can be very painful, **shoulder pain is usually not caused by anything serious.**

Some potential causes of shoulder pain are:

- muscle, tendon or ligament injuries e.g. sprains, strains or tears
- age-related changes, also known as osteoarthritis.
- sudden changes in activity levels – doing much more than usual or being much less active can cause pain
- repetitive or overuse injuries of the muscles/tendons around the shoulder
- specific conditions like frozen shoulder, rotator cuff related shoulder pain or shoulder instability
- poor sleep, stress, feeling low or very tired can also make pain worse

## What are the symptoms?

Everyone is different, but you may notice:

- pain around the shoulder, upper arm and even radiating down towards the elbow

- difficulty lifting the arm or taking your hand behind your back
- discomfort when laying on the painful side at nighttime
- weakness in the arm

Pain can vary from day to day. This does **not** mean you are causing damage.

## Self-help

Most new shoulder pain will improve within **6-8 weeks**.

These useful tips should help with your recovery:

- change activity levels – we do not recommend complete rest but changing or slightly reducing your activity levels can help in the early stages
- keep the arm moving – gentle movement helps prevent stiffness and won't cause harm
- use simple pain relief – ask a pharmacist or GP for advice first
- try different sleeping positions – a pillow to support the arm or to stop you rolling onto the painful side can help
- stay at work or return as soon as you can – your employer or GP can help with adjustments

- look after your sleep and stress – both can affect how much pain you feel
- try gentle exercises – moving regularly and doing simple exercises can help
- use heat or ice – a heat pack/hot water bottle/ice pack can ease pain (don't put this onto bare skin)

## Should I refer myself to physiotherapy?

You may benefit from physiotherapy if:

- your shoulder pain is not improving after a few weeks, despite the above advice
- pain is affecting your work, sleep or daily activities
- you are struggling to move your arm normally
- you experience repeated episodes of shoulder pain

## When should I seek urgent medical advice?

Shoulder pain is **rarely serious**, however go to **Accident & Emergency or an Urgent Care Centre straight away** if you have:

- shoulder pain following a fall or injury
- a visible deformity or change in shape to the shoulder
- a big loss of movement in the shoulder or ability to lift the arm

- sudden swelling, redness, warmth around the shoulder with a fever
- shoulder or arm pain, along with chest pain, shortness of breath, palpitations or pain spreading into the jaw

Contact your **GP or call 111 urgently** if you have:

- new, unexplained shoulder pain with a history of any of the following:
  - cancer
  - HIV
  - TB
  - inflammatory arthritis
- shoulder pain combined with any of the following:
  - feeling unwell
  - a loss of appetite
  - fever
  - unexplained weight loss
  - night sweats
- pain affecting both of your shoulders (and possibly hips), with a lot of morning stiffness.

## Remember

Most shoulder pain is **not a sign of a serious problem**. It will often improve with time, gentle movement and the right

advice. Staying active and confident in movement helps recovery.



If you need help to understand this leaflet or would like it in a different language or format such as large print, Braille or audio, please ask a member of staff.



## MSK Physiotherapy Service

Find out more about the MSK Physiotherapy Service and what we offer

[www.leicspart.nhs.uk/service/musculoskeletal-msk-therapy-physiotherapy/](http://www.leicspart.nhs.uk/service/musculoskeletal-msk-therapy-physiotherapy/)



## Further Resources

Access our other MSK Physiotherapy resources [www.leicspart.nhs.uk/msk-](http://www.leicspart.nhs.uk/msk-physiotherapy-resources-getting-started/)

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