



Looking after your shoulders

Shoulder pain is a common complaint for people with spinal cord injury.

Although there are many types of shoulder pain, the two main types are:

Neuropathic pain as a result of the damage to nerves in and leading 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.

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 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 affect.

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. cress, comb your hair and reach for things.
- 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 increase.
- It may be necessary to give up sport or work.
- You may feel frustrated by the affect 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.

How can I prevent shoulder pain? (cont)

- 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. If possible, your ear, shoulder, hip joint and the axle of your wheelchair should make a straight line to the floor. If your 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.
- Always check that you are sitting properly in the chair using a mirror. Know how to correct your own posture, independently or by directing someone else to help you.
- As you age, be willing to accept a bit of help so your shoulders can last the distance.



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 equipment.
- If the pain persists, see a physiotherapist for treatment and advice.

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

Prevention is better than cure.

Courtesy: Queensland Government