NHS
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Shoulder Dislocation – Patient Information Leaflet

The shoulder is one of the easiest joints to dislocate because the ball joint of your upper arm sits in a very shallow socket. This makes the arm extremely mobile and able to move in many directions, but also means it is not very stable. In some cases, the surrounding tissues supporting the shoulder joint may also be overstretched or torn.

You can dislocate your shoulder if you fall on to your arm heavily. Most people dislocate their shoulder while playing a contact sport, such as rugby. In older people, the cause is often falling [1] on to an outstretched hand, for example slipping on ice. Shoulder dislocations can happen more easily in people who are highly flexible, such as those with hypermobile joints.

Relocating the shoulder back into the socket usually happens in A&E but sometimes it is done in an operating theatre with a general anaesthetic. You may be offered a sling to keep your shoulder in a comfortable position. You can usually go home soon after your shoulder is put back in place, but you will need to rest your arm in a sling while the pain settles. Unless you have sustained a fracture you should not need to wear your sling for longer than 2 weeks and it should only be used for comfort.

Some people tear ligaments, tendons, and other tissues when they dislocate their shoulder. Sometimes surgery is needed to repair these tissues. Surgery can sometimes be avoided by doing appropriate exercises to strengthen the shoulder. You will need to return to hospital for follow-up care in either the acute soft tissue injury clinic or fracture clinic, and may also be referred for physiotherapy [2] to rehabilitate and strengthen your shoulder.

[1] www.nhs.uk/conditions/falls
[2] www.nhs.uk/conditions/physiotherapy

Initial Management

Your shoulder may be painful for the first 2-3 weeks. Take regular over-the-counter pain relief until it settles. An ice pack may help initially with pain and swelling (make sure the ice is not in direct contact with the skin). If you feel your pain relief is inadequate you should seek advice from your pharmacist or doctor. Recovery normally takes between 6 and 12 weeks but can take longer.

In the initial stages please use your arm as pain allows but avoid exercising your shoulder above shoulder height for 2 weeks. It is important to keep your elbow and wrist moving to prevent stiffness.

Early Exercises

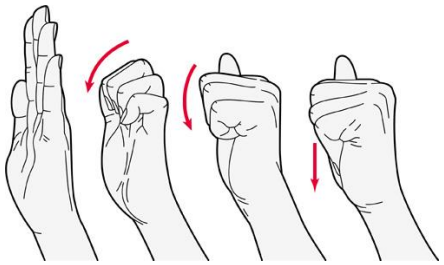
It is important to strengthen the shoulder and to be able to move it through a range of different movements without experiencing pain or fear of it re-dislocating. To begin with you should try these gentle exercises regularly throughout the day. Some mild discomfort is normal but stop if any of these exercises significantly increase your pain.

General points when exercising

- Use painkillers to reduce the pain as advised by your healthcare practitioner
- It is normal to experience discomfort, aching, or stretching when performing these exercises. However, if you experience intense and lasting pain for longer than 30 minutes after doing these exercises you should reduce them.
- If your shoulder feels unstable or likely to dislocate, you should stop doing that exercise and ask your clinician for advice.

Hand

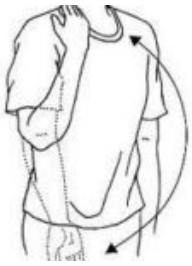
Keep your hand moving

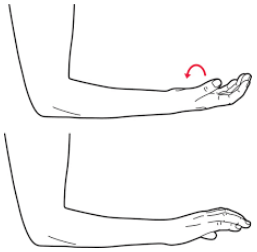


Elbow

Bend and straighten your elbow

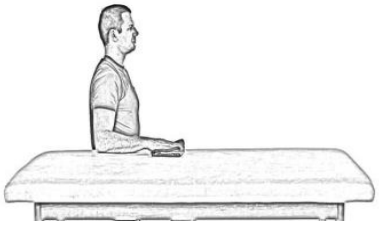
Turn your hand palm up and palm down

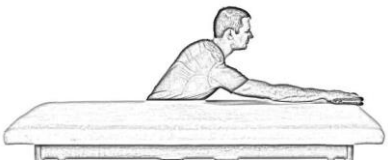




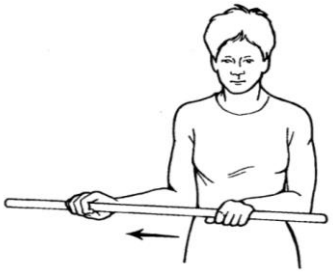
Shoulder

Table Slide: Start sitting or standing with the arm/hand supported on a countertop or table. Slowly slide your arm out in front of you until you feel a stretch. Use a towel or something similar, to reduce friction.





Passive External Rotation: Standing or sitting, hold a stick with your unaffected arm. Bend your elbow to 90 degrees. Use the stick to gently push into the hand of the injured arm.



Your arm should slowly rotate outward, while maintaining a 90-degree angle at the elbow
Rotate the arm until a stretch is felt

Additional Information

Smoking cessation: evidence suggests that smoking prolongs healing times, in extreme cases it can stop healing altogether. Stopping, or reducing, smoking will help ensure optimal recovery. For advice on smoking cessation and local support available, please refer to the following website: http://smokefree.nhs.uk or discuss with your GP.

When can I drive: You can return to driving once your sling has been removed and you feel confident to safely control your vehicle.

When can I return to work / sport: You will usually be able to resume most activities within 2 weeks but should avoid heavy lifting and sports involving shoulder movements for between 6 weeks and 3 months. You will probably be off work for 2 to 4 weeks, or longer if you have a physical job.

What are the chances of my shoulder dislocating again: The chances of recurrence will depend on your age and how well the tissues surrounding the joint heal. Performing the exercises your physiotherapist gives you can reduce the risk of dislocating your shoulder again.

For more information contact:

Physiotherapy Reception, Location A9, Airedale General Hospital

Phone: 01535 293656

If you are deaf or have a hearing or speech impairment, the Relay UK Service can be used to contact us. Dial **18001** followed by the contact number on your letter / of the hospital.

If you require this leaflet in other languages or formats, please telephone the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) on 01535 294019.

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