

**Shoulder Rotator Cuff Tears**

**Common Questions**

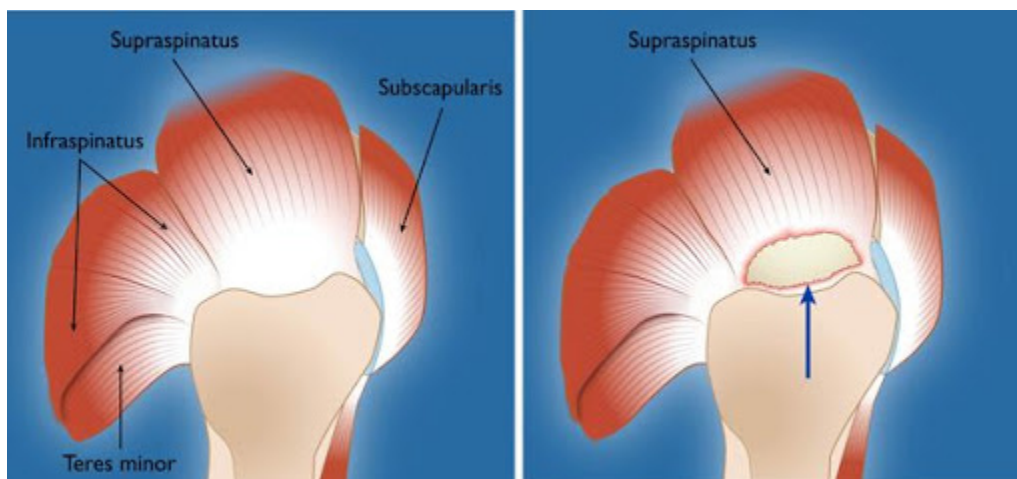


More information can be found on  
Dr. Stetson's website at [www.sportsmedicinedr.com](http://www.sportsmedicinedr.com)

**Dr. Stetson explains a Rotator Cuff Repair on "The Doctors" TV show. [Click here \(https://www.thedoctorstv.com/videos/rotator-cuff-surgery\)](https://www.thedoctorstv.com/videos/rotator-cuff-surgery) to watch the video.**

**What is the rotator cuff?**

The rotator cuff comprises four separate muscles that surround the top of the shoulder. These muscles stabilize the ball of the shoulder joint to keep it in the socket. The four muscles include the supraspinatus muscle, the infraspinatus muscle, the subscapularis muscle, and the teres minor muscle. The supraspinatus is the most commonly injured of the four muscles.



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#### **How is the rotator cuff usually injured?**

In younger people, a rotator cuff injury is usually caused by overuse or by activities that require repetitive shoulder motion, such as tennis, swimming, or baseball, and the pain generally occurs during the overhead portion of the activity. This injury, referred to as tendinitis, is common in young people and usually results from strain of the rotator cuff muscles.

In older people, shoulder pain may occur secondary to a structural problem. A small hook of bone can form and rub the top of the rotator cuff muscles, causing pain and inflammation of the rotator cuff and eventual tearing of the tendon.



#### **What is a degenerative rotator cuff tear?**

Most tears of the rotator cuff are a result of the wearing down of the tendon that occurs slowly over time. This degeneration naturally occurs over time as we age. Several factors contribute to degenerative or chronic rotator cuff tears including repetitive lifting or overhead sports. As we get older, the blood supply in our rotator cuff tendons lessens and the body's natural ability to repair tendon damage is impaired. This can ultimately lead to a tendon tear.

#### **What are the symptoms of a torn rotator cuff?**

Patients typically do not complain of shoulder pain but rather arm pain localized to the side of their arm. This is called referred pain. The most common symptoms include pain at rest and pain at night, especially if lying on the affected shoulder. Pain when lifting your arm above your head is also a common complaint along with weakness when lifting your arm overhead. Crepitus or a crackling sensation when moving the shoulder is also a common complaint.

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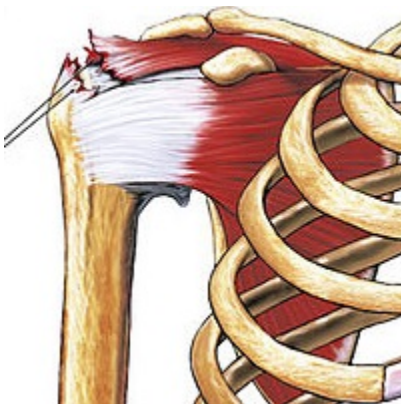
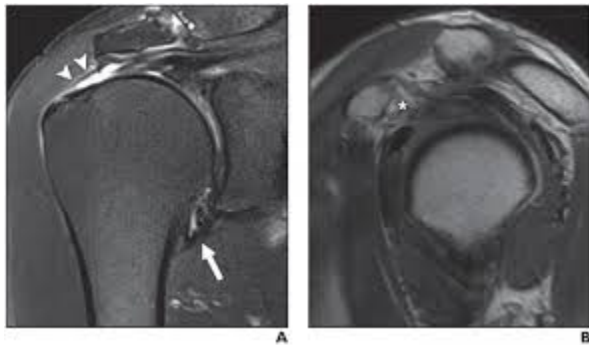
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### How is a rotator cuff tear diagnosed?

A clinical exam will identify the location of pain and tenderness during range of motion of the shoulder. People often have pain raising their shoulder actively above their head. Routine x-rays will not diagnose a rotator cuff tear, but they will show bony overhang that catches on the rotator cuff. Sometimes a physical exam will not identify a rotator cuff problem and further diagnostic tests, such as an MRI, are needed to fully evaluate the rotator cuff muscles.



### How is a torn rotator cuff treated?

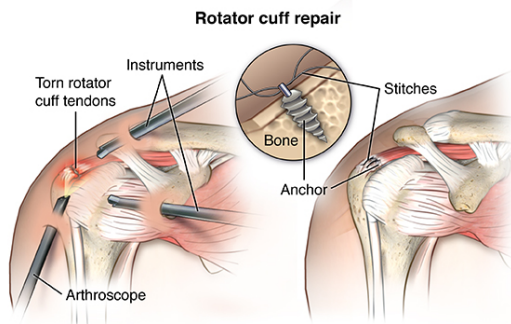
Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory medicines and physical therapy are necessary when a rotator cuff muscle is inflamed. The physical therapy regimen may include muscle strengthening and

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ultrasound treatment. Applying ice directly to the area that is most painful also can help to reduce swelling and relieve pain. A steroid injection can also relieve the pain and inflammation. This especially provides relief of tendinitis of the rotator cuff. However, when the rotator cuff is completely torn, physical therapy and muscle strengthening is not always helpful. In these cases arthroscopic surgery is usually necessary to shave the undersurface of the bone that catches on the rotator cuff. If the muscle is completely torn, then it is necessary to reattach the rotator cuff to bone. This can be done arthroscopically or through a small skin incision approximately two to three inches in length. The muscle is reattached to bone to relieve pain and improve shoulder function. Using advanced arthroscopic techniques, recovery is much faster, and less painful than with traditional open shoulder surgery.



### How soon will a rotator cuff muscle heal?

If it is necessary to repair the rotator cuff muscle, it may take six weeks to two months for the tendon and muscles to completely heal. People who engage in activities that require overhead movement may need three to four months to heal, depending on the extent of the rotator cuff tear. If the muscle is only partially torn and is repaired at the time of surgery, recovery is much faster.

### Does a torn rotator cuff always need surgery?

No, not all rotator cuff tears require surgery. It really depends on your age and your activity level. If you are older and do not require to do much overhead lifting and there is minimal or no pain, surgery may not be necessary. However, it is always possible that a small tear can become larger with time and this makes it more difficult to repair.

### Is surgery for a torn rotator cuff always successful?

The majority of patients report improved shoulder strength and less pain after surgery for a torn rotator cuff. Surgeon expertise is more important in achieving satisfactory results than the specific technique. Good surgical technique followed by a structured physical therapy program are the two most important factors in getting the best result as possible. Other factors that can influence the results of surgery include poor tissue tendon quality at the time of surgery, large, massive tears that have been present for a long time, and also poor patient compliance with rehabilitation after surgery. Smoking can also influence the healing of the repair and can delay it.

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#### **What are the possible complications of rotator cuff surgery?**

After rotator cuff surgery, a small percentage of patients experience complications. Besides the risks of surgery which include blood loss or problems related to anesthesia, other complications include infection, nerve injury, stiffness, and the tendon re-tearing. However, these complications are rare and the vast majority of patients experience no complications following surgery.

#### **What if the rotator cuff is only partial torn?**

If the rotator cuff tendon is only partially torn, surgery may not be necessary. The first steps in treatment is to try nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory medicines along with rest and physical therapy. The physical therapy regimen may include muscle strengthening with a trial of returning to activities. If the pain and weakness continues, a one-time steroid injection can also relieve the pain and inflammation. This may provide relief of pain of the partially torn rotator cuff if the tear is small.

#### **What does physical therapy do for a torn rotator cuff?**

Physical therapy will not make a torn rotator cuff heal. However, if it is a small tear, physical therapy can strengthen all of the other muscles surrounding the shoulder joint and may allow you to regain function and strength without surgery.



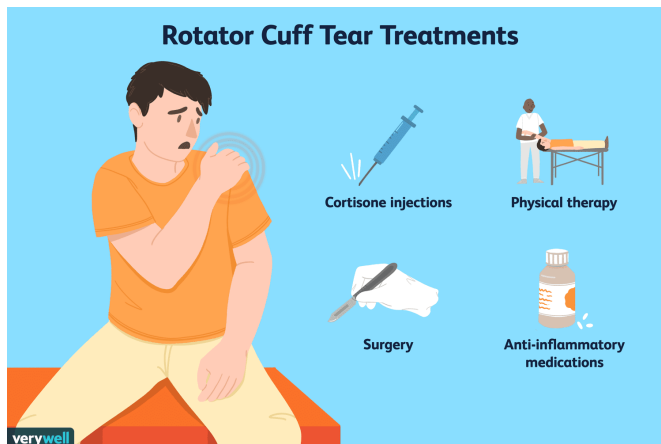
#### **What is purpose of a cortisone injection for a torn rotator cuff?**

The purpose of a cortisone injection is to help relieve pain and inflammation associated with a torn rotator cuff tendon. It will not allow the tendon to heal but rather its purpose is to decrease the pain associated with a tear. It is reasonable to try an injection one time, especially if you are older and wish to avoid surgery. There is controversy as to having more than one injection as too many may causing problems with healing of the tendon if surgery is performed in the future.

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### What if I have any other questions?

If you have any other questions, more information can be found on Dr. Stetson's website at [www.sportsmedicinedr.com](http://www.sportsmedicinedr.com) or just call Dr. Stetson's office, we are always happy to answer any questions you may have.

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