

## **Shoulder AC Joint Injuries**

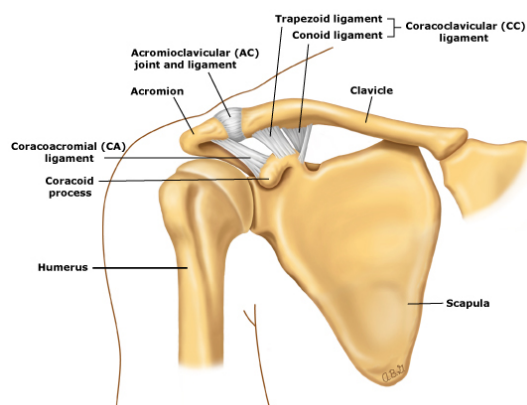
### **Common Questions**



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

### **What is the AC joint in the shoulder?**

The top of the wing bone or scapula is the acromion. The joint formed where the acromion connects to the collar bone or clavicle is the AC joint. Usually there is a protuberance bump in this area, which can be quite large in many people. This joint, like most joints in the body, has a cartilage disk or meniscus inside and the ends of the bones are covered with cartilage. The joint is held together by a capsule, and the clavicle is held in the proper position by two heavy ligaments called coracoclavicular ligaments.



### **How is the AC joint usually injured?**

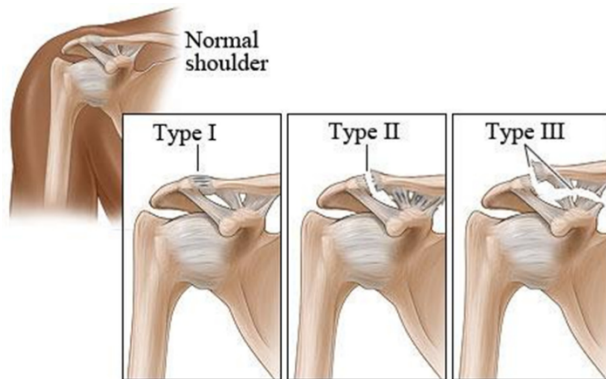
The AC joint is injured most often when one falls directly on the point of the shoulder. The trauma will separate the acromion away from the clavicle, causing a sprain or dislocation of the AC joint. In a mild injury called a grade one injury, the ligaments which support the AC joint are simply

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### Common Questions

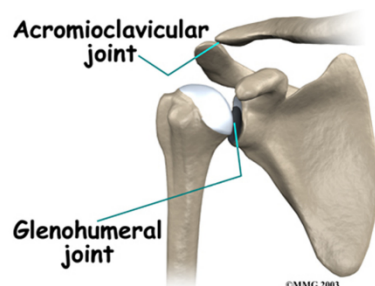
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stretched. With a more severe injury, the ligaments can partially tear and this is called a grade two injury. When the ligaments completely tear, this is a grade three injury and the end of the clavicle protrudes beneath the skin and is visible as a prominent bump.



### What is a shoulder separation?

A shoulder separation is not truly an injury to the shoulder joint but rather an injury to the acromioclavicular joint which is also called the AC joint. The AC joint is where the collarbone meets the highest point of the shoulder blade called the acromion.



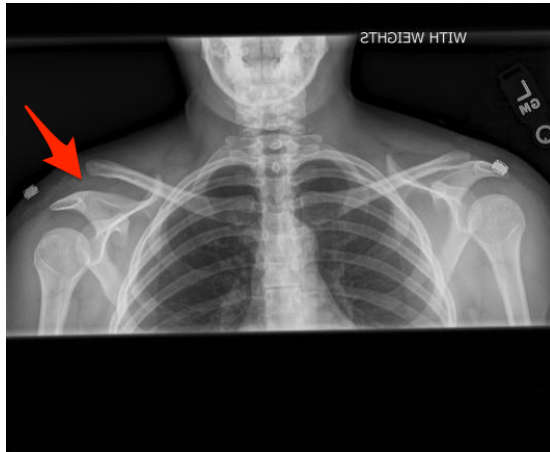
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### **Common Questions**

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#### **How is an AC joint separation diagnosed?**

Most often the clinical exam will demonstrate tenderness or bruising around the top of the shoulder near the AC joint, and the suspected diagnosis can be confirmed with an x-ray that will compare the injured side with the healthy joint.



#### **What is the proper treatment for a sprained AC joint?**

When an AC joint is first sprained, conservative treatment is certainly the best. Applying ice directly to the point of the shoulder is helpful to inhibit swelling. The arm can be supported with a sling which also relieves some of the weight from the shoulder. Gentle motion of the arm is allowed to prevent stiffness and exercises are very helpful to improve function of the elbow, wrist, and hand. Any early attempts at vigorous shoulder mobilization will lead to more swelling and pain.

#### **How long does it take for a shoulder separation to heal?**

Depending on how severe the injury is, a grade one or grade two injury may heal adequately in two to four weeks. In more severe cases, the shoulder may not heal without surgery.

#### **When and why is surgery necessary for AC joint separations?**

Usually surgery is reserved for those cases of residual pain or an unacceptable deformity of the joint after several months of conservative treatment. The pain can occur with direct pressure on the joint, such as with straps from underwear or work clothing. Sometimes there will be catching, clicking, or pain with overhead activities, such as lifting, throwing, or reaching. Finally, in some people with very thin skin and very little muscular and soft tissue padding above their shoulders, the prominent clavicle after the separation may be considered unattractive, since the shoulder can appear to be unbalanced.

**Shoulder AC Joint Injuries**  
**Common Questions**  
**Dr. Stetson**



**Are there other causes of AC joint pain and disability?**

Arthritis can occur as an isolated event in the AC joint, causing stiffness, aching, and sometimes swelling. Another condition, called distal clavicle osteolysis, gives a similar picture usually in young people who lift heavy weights. This is called “weightlifter’s shoulder.”



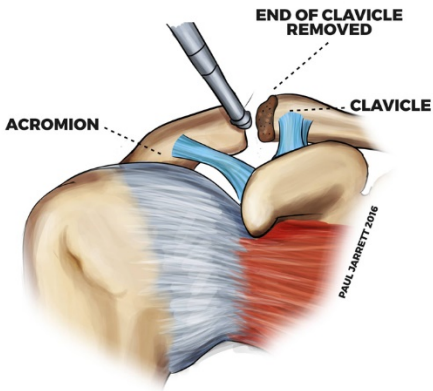
**What type of surgery can repair AC joint problems?**

The simplest type of surgery for AC joint injury involves resection or removal of the end of the clavicle using arthroscopic surgical techniques. This is called a Mumford procedure. If the joint becomes painful because of osteolysis or arthritis, or the separation is only minor, this technique can be very satisfactory.

## Shoulder AC Joint Injuries

### Common Questions

Dr. Stetson



### What if the AC joint is severely displaced?

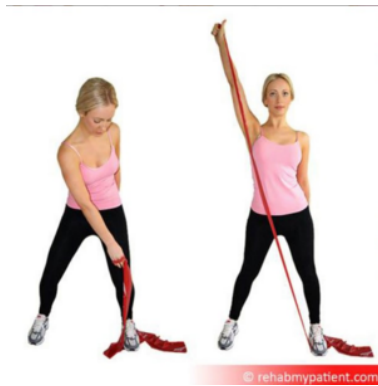
When the joint is severely displaced, a more complex procedure is needed to restore the position of the clavicle. This operation usually is done by making a two-inch incision over the joint, removing the end of the clavicle, and reconstructing the ligaments which were torn originally.



### Is physical therapy necessary for after surgery?

Physical therapy after surgery depends on the type of surgery performed. Usually, when the Mumford procedure is performed using an arthroscopic technique, the arm can be treated with a sling. Bathing is allowed after three days, and elbow, wrist and hand exercises are begun immediately. Lifting is limited for three weeks, but following that, progressive exercise and motion activities proceed as the symptoms allow. When a reconstruction is performed, the rehabilitation process is slower to allow the newly reconstructed ligaments to heal.

**Shoulder AC Joint Injuries**  
**Common Questions**  
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**What if I have any other questions?**

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