

Shoulder Labral Tear

Thanks to all of the recent advances in technology, doctors are able to treat and identify injuries that would otherwise have gone undetected 20 years ago. Miniature cameras allow the physician to see inside of the shoulder joint. Using this tool, they have identified and treated injuries known as shoulder labral tears.

Shoulder Labral Tear Anatomy

Around the shoulder joint (the ball and socket joint) is a labrum. It is similar to cartilage, and it forms a rim around the edge of the socket. The purpose of this labrum is to make the shoulder joint slightly deeper, which increases stability of the shoulder and holds it in the joint better.

Causes of Labral Tear

A labral tear is often caused by sport, especially over-head sports. Throwing, tennis, cricket, and other sports which may require repeated over-head throwing can cause labral tears. Impact sports like rugby, football and hockey can also cause labral tears. Assault courses and having your arm wrenched can also cause a labral tear. They are often seen in teenagers and young adults.

A common cause of labral tears is shoulder dislocation. As the shoulder dislocates, the labrum is torn as the arm comes out of the socket.

Labral tears can also be degenerative. Over several decades, the labrum weakens and this makes it more likely to tear.

How do I Know if I have a Labral Tear?

The shoulder is almost always injured. So you will be aware of something traumatic that occurred to the shoulder in most cases. Within a few hours, the shoulder starts to stiffen up and it's painful to move. Normal mobility recovers in about 4-6 weeks for small labral tears. Often full mobility is restored to the shoulder, but that might not be the end of it. Many months or years later, you may still be complaining of a low-grade shoulder pain on certain movements, or a repeated clicking to the shoulder. This could be a sign of a labral tear.

How is a Shoulder labral Tear Diagnosed?

The shoulder labral tear is usually diagnosed from the case history and physical examination. The case history would give a strong indication as to a potential labral tear. There are some special shoulder tests which can point towards a possible labral tear, but these are not full-proof and can show false positives.

If a shoulder labral tear is suspected, the doctor or therapist might request you to have an MRI scan, or an MRA scan. They are similar, but the MRA involves being injected with contrast which helps to show the labrum and any potential tear. Without contrast, small labral tears may not show on MRI although larger tears often do show.

How to Treat a Shoulder Labral Tear:

1. Anti-Inflammatory Medication

An anti-inflammatory medication can help to relieve some of the pain and inflammation you are dealing with in the injury site. However its use should only be short term, if at all.

2. Rest

Take some time to rest and allow the shoulder the time it needs to heal. By refraining from engaging in activities that aggravate the site, it will help it to heal faster.

3. Ice

Apply ice to the injured site for 5-10 minutes at a time three to five times per day. Make sure to wrap the ice in a thin cloth to prevent any ice burn from occurring on the skin.

4. Rehabilitation Exercises

To help strengthen the rotator cuff muscles, you might need to go through a series of rehabilitation exercises.

5. Arthroscopic Surgery

During the surgical procedure, the doctor will go in and examine the biceps tendon and the rim. If the injury is strictly in the rim, without having the tendon involved, the shoulder will remain stable. The surgeon will work to remove the torn flap and fix any associated problems. If the tear goes beyond the biceps tendon or the tendon is detached, the shoulder is considered unstable. The surgeon will have to repair and reattach the tendon with absorbable tacks, sutures and wires.

Tips:

- If possible, try to avoid falling on an outstretched arm.
- Try to refrain from any activity where your shoulder is going to take a direct blow to it.
- Suddenly pulling when trying to lift heavy objects can cause you to tear the shoulder joint.
- Violently reaching overhead, such as when trying to stop from sliding or falling, can cause tears in the shoulder joint.
- Repetitive shoulder motions can cause you a labral tear.

