

Subacromial Bursitis

Subacromial bursitis occurs when the shoulder bursa becomes inflamed. There are several bursas in your shoulder but the most common is the subacromial one. The bursa is a sac that is filled with fluid to help reduce the amount of friction within the shoulder. The subacromial bursa tends to be the most commonly inflamed of all the bursa in the shoulder.

Subacromial bursitis is a common cause of pain in the shoulder that is often related to shoulder impingement of the bursa between the bone and the rotator cuff tendons. The subdeltoid bursa isn't as commonly inflamed in the shoulder.

Subacromial Bursitis Anatomy

The shoulder joint is made up of the ball and socket, but next to this is the acromio-clavicular joint (ACJ). The ACJ is the articulation between the clavicle and the top of the shoulder blade which is known as the acromion. Underneath the ACJ sits a bursa, known as the subacromial bursa (sub = under, acromial = tip of the shoulder). The bursa protects the underlying tendon and muscle known as the supraspinatus.

How Do You Get Shoulder Bursitis?

Subacromial bursitis is caused by:

1. **Repeated stressful movements** of the shoulder over-head. Golf and tennis are possible contributing factors.
2. **Arthritis of the ACJ** – this can form small bone spurs which pinch the shoulder tendon (supraspinatus tendon).
3. **Hooked acromion** – this can irritate the bursa underneath.

It is not uncommon to have subacromial bursitis with other conditions, including shoulder impingement syndrome, tendinopathy, rotator cuff tear, and arthritis of the ACJ.

How to Treat Subacromial Bursitis:

1. Rest from painful activities

In the first stage of the injury, you need to allow your shoulder time to heal. The first step is to give your shoulder the time it needs to recover from any painful movements and postures. Refrain from doing any activity that causes pain in the shoulder. Stop overhead shoulder movements.

2. Sling

You might have to wear a sling or have the shoulder taped to deliver additional pain relief. In certain instances, you might have to sleep in an upright position or use a pillow for support to help alleviate pain and inflammation. However, do this under guidance of your therapist and this should only be done in the short term if the shoulder is too painful to self-support. You should be aware that using a sling can reduce range of mobility.

3. Ice

Apply ice to the affected area for 5-10 minutes at a time three to five times per day. Make sure to wrap the ice in a thin towel to prevent ice burn on the skin.

4. Anti-Inflammatory Medication

Taking an anti-inflammatory medication can help to relieve swelling and pain in the affected areas. Make sure to follow the directions of your provider on how much to take and when to take it, as some therapists prefer the use of more natural anti-inflammatories.

5. Steroid Injection

A cortico-steroid injection can help reduce the inflammation of the bursa.

6. Physical Therapy or Manual Therapy

Manual therapists will be able to treat shoulder bursitis by improving the range of motion of the shoulder and reducing inflammation around the shoulder. Electrotherapy such as ultrasound can also be useful. Acupuncture may also help in some cases.

How Long Does it Take to Recover from Shoulder Bursitis?

If the problem is simply just the bursitis, recovery time is anywhere up to 6 weeks. However, in many cases the bursitis is caused by an underlying problem and can also be present with other shoulder conditions which are mentioned above. In these cases, recovery can be anywhere between 6 weeks and 9 months.

Do I Need Shoulder Surgery?

The most common form of shoulder surgery is subacromial decompression. This helps to reduce the compression on the bursa and the underlying supraspinatus tendon. Surgery is only recommended if you have tried everything first (rehab, exercises, ice, steroid injection) and nothing is working. In many cases the reason is underlying arthritis of the ACJ. These are small bone spurs that form around the joint, and the joint becomes thicker, impinging the bursa. During shoulder decompression, these bone spurs and thickening around the joint is removed, and the bursa is also removed. You should be aware that rehabilitation following shoulder decompression is anywhere up to 6 months.

What is the Best Way to get the Inflammation out of the Bursa?

Use Ice every day – a cold pack over the tip of the shoulder. Hold this on for 5-10 minutes and repeat twice per day. Don't just use it for a few days, use it for 6 weeks before re-evaluating. Steroid injections are a very strong way to reduce inflammation, and you can discuss this with your doctor. Gentle movement and exercises will help reduce the inflammation in the shoulder and the bursa, as will passive range of motion exercises that a therapist might do. Ultrasound directly to the shoulder can also help reduce inflammation. Reducing strain on the shoulder and minimizing overhead movements may help with the swelling too. If the above do not work, then consider some acupuncture which can help reduce inflammation.

Tips:

- Regardless of whether you are sitting, standing, walking or lying down, you want to make sure your body is in proper alignment by practicing proper posture.
- Perform a series of exercises to help improve stability and strength in your shoulder.
- Eliminating whatever seems to be causing you problems with impingement is the key to preventing any shoulder bursitis.
- Overusing the shoulder joint can end up causing the bursa to become inflamed and irritated.
- Ask you Rehab My Patient therapist about using ice, and if so, how frequently.

