



Frozen Shoulder

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A frozen shoulder is medically called adhesive capsulitis. It is a shoulder joint with significant loss of motion in all directions. The motion is limited when the patient attempts to move the arm (active motion) **and** when the physician or physical therapist moves the arm with the person relaxed (passive motion). With the onset of a frozen shoulder people usually notice that they have stiffness lifting their arm above their head, reaching across their body or tucking in the back of a shirt or blouse. Frozen shoulders surprisingly most often occur without injury or trauma. Frozen shoulders affect more woman than men. They usually occur between ages 50 and 65. It has been estimated that 15 percent of diabetics will get a frozen shoulder. Being immobilized for a healing fracture or after surgery may result in a frozen shoulder. People with chronic inflammatory diseases of the shoulder such as arthritis, chronic tendonitis, and chronic bursitis may develop a frozen shoulder. After lumpectomy or a partial mastectomy exercises are always given to prevent a frozen shoulder.

The cause of a frozen shoulder probably is an underlying inflammatory process. The capsule (ligaments) surrounding the shoulder joint thicken and shorten. This leaves less space for the arm to move around.

A frozen shoulder develops over a period of months in 3 stages. Each stage is approximately 4 months in length.

Stage One Freezing phase: Pain increases with movement and is usually worse at night. The motion lessens week by week and pain increases as motion is lost. In this phase the shoulder is actively inflamed. During this phase treatment may include anti-inflammatories, cortisone injections, and gentle pain-free physical therapy. During this stage it is very important to avoid irritating the shoulder tissues. For example, push open heavy doors with both of your arms or your buttocks. When driving, hold the lower parts of the steering wheel. Use a step ladder, instead of reaching overhead. Avoid using a car with a manual transmission. Sudden, jerking motions and heavy lifting are to be absolutely avoided.

Stage Two Frozen phase: The pain decreases and arm movement is more comfortable. The motion is at its worst and may be limited 50 percent less than the other arm. During this phase the inflammation is subsiding and healing is occurring. It is important in physical therapy to begin gentle manual joint mobilizations to stretch and reform the joint capsule. Specific exercises will also need to be done daily at home.

Stage Three **Thawing phase:** The inflammation is fully resolved and motion is restored with usage of the arm. It is important that full passive joint mobility is restored by more aggressive manual physical therapy. Muscles need to be strengthened to match the other arm. Particular emphasis is placed on rotator cuff strengthening and balancing the strength of all the muscles that attach to the shoulder blade. Home exercises will be advanced. Activities such as swimming, golf, racquet sports and gardening are encouraged **as tolerated**.

If the shoulder does not progress through all three stages in a normal manner, then on **very rare** occasions a shoulder manipulation under anesthesia may be recommended by an orthopedic surgeon.

The most important thing to remember if you have a frozen shoulder is that it occurs in stages. Your arm usage must take the stages into consideration. You should be able to recognize the stages by your symptoms and be able to be appropriately active. Doing too much with the arm during stage one (freezing phase) will probably result in getting stuck for a longer time in stage one. This will increase your overall recovery time. Not being appropriately active in stage three (thawing phase) can result in a permanently stiff shoulder.

The staff at North Boulder Physical Therapy is well trained and experienced with treatment of this complex condition in all its stages. We recommend that you discuss physical therapy referral/prescription with your physician.