Shoulder Pain

By Dr. Ramona Warren

Imagine what life would be like if your shoulder did not move around freely. If you have ever had a shoulder injury or shoulder pain, you understand the challenge of performing simple everyday tasks. Trying to reach for something overhead, or simply drying your hair, becomes next to impossible unless you are ambidextrous. Having suffered with a frozen shoulder in my teens, I can still recall the incredible pain that brought tears to my eyes when trying to lift my arm to flip the blinker switch in my car. The pain in my shoulder had completely altered my life.

The shoulder is a complex joint that moves in more directions than almost any other joint in the body. The shoulder is formed by a shallow ball and socket joint, which gives the shoulder a greater range of motion. However, the shallowness of the joint and increased motion also makes it much more vulnerable to injury.

There are different types of shoulder pain and sometimes it can be difficult to determine what is the root cause. Many times it’s a combination of issues that are causing the pain.

Here are some of the common shoulder problems:

* **Bursitis**- The bursa is a fluid filled sac that reduces friction and cushions the joint allowing it to move freely. When the bursa becomes swollen and inflamed, it produces pain. Bursitis pain can occur in the upper arm and sometimes radiate down the arm to the elbow, wrist or hand. The shoulder pain will increase when you attempt to lift your arm above your head.
* **Tendonitis**- Shoulder tendonitis develops from overuse or repetitive motions and is often seen in those people who use the shoulder excessively in activities such as baseball, tennis, carpentry, weightlifting or other repetitive activities that involve overhead motions. Poor movement mechanics, along with the repetitive activity, inflames the tendon, which is like a cord attaching the muscle to the bone. Tendonitis often develops over time. Sometimes the tendon can tear. Small tears will often heal with rest. Larger tears can actually split the tendon in two. These larger tears occur most commonly in the rotator cuff and biceps tendon.
* **Frozen shoulder** (Adhesive Capsulitis) - Frozen shoulder is a condition where arm motion is limited, and it can be very painful to move or lift the shoulder. The onset can be sudden if there is an impact injury or the individual has had surgery that immobilized the joint. More commonly, however, frozen shoulder develops gradually, and many times there is no clear cause. It is seen most often in people between the ages of 40-70, especially postmenopausal women. Frozen shoulder is also more commonly seen in those who have been diagnosed with diabetes, heart disease or Parkinson’s disease.
* **Rotator cuff**- The rotator cuff consists of four muscles that stabilize and hold the shoulder in place. The rotator cuff muscles attach from the shoulder blade to the humerus (arm bone). Even though injuries and repetitive stress are often the source for rotator cuff injuries, most pain related to the rotator cuff is due to wear and tear. According to Edward Laskowski, M.D. who is the co-director of the Mayo Clinic Sports Medicine Center in Rochester, MN, 50 percent of 50 year olds have some evidence of rotator cuff degeneration on MRI scans of the shoulder.
* **Arthritis**- Osteoarthritis is known as wear-and-tear arthritis because it is associated with long-term wear on the joints causing the cartilage, which cushions and protects the joint, to wear down. The wear and tear can be due to overuse or to traumatic injuries in the past that damaged the joint. Many times the joints might “click” and feel stiff and painful.
* **Referred pain**- Pain in the shoulder does not always come directly from the shoulder joint. Oftentimes, pain can be referred from other areas of the body. The neck is a common source of shoulder pain since the nerves from the neck supply many of the shoulder muscles. The infraspinatus muscle, located in the back of the shoulder blade, can cause pain all the way to the wrist. The pectoral (chest) muscle can cause pain into the shoulder and down the arm. Referred pain from organs can also cause shoulder pain. The gallbladder and liver commonly refer pain to the right shoulder. The pancreas and stomach refer pain to the left shoulder. Even the heart can cause referred pain. For example, symptoms of a heart attack can include pain radiating into the left shoulder and down the arm.

When you consider all the motions of the shoulder and the stress it undertakes on a daily basis, it is easy to see why shoulder problems are so prevalent. Certainly, there will be some conditions that require surgery. However, studies show as many as 90 percent of patients with shoulder pain respond well to simple treatments including rest, proper exercises to strengthen and balance the muscles of the joint, and changing whatever activity led to the shoulder pain.

Another step you can take to relieve shoulder pain is to remove inflammatory foods such as gluten, dairy, sugar, artificial sweeteners, soy and corn from your diet. Any word ending in “-itis” refers to inflammation. Arthritis, tendonitis, bursitis and adhesive capsulitis (frozen shoulder) are inflammatory conditions. You will help relieve many painful shoulder conditions simply by changing the foods you eat.

Changing my diet helped tremendously with the shoulder pain I suffered with when I was younger. Even though my shoulder still “creaks and crackles” I have no pain since I now eat a diet low in inflammatory foods and quit being a “sugar junkie.” However, diet alone will not help all shoulder pain. Chiropractic care and a good exercise program are also important. Through the years I have helped many patients with painful shoulder conditions through a combination of structural treatments, trigger point work, laser therapy and soft tissue therapy. Neuromuscular massage therapy and physical therapy can also be very beneficial. A good chiropractor or physical therapist can help teach you what to do to help prevent further shoulder problems.