

Rotator Cuff Tear & Repair

What You Need to Know

What Is the Rotator Cuff?

The rotator cuff is a group of four muscles and their tendons that surround the shoulder joint, holding the ball of the upper arm securely in the shoulder socket and allowing a full range of arm movement. When one or more of these tendons tears — partially or completely — the result is pain, weakness, and loss of function that can range from mild to severely disabling.

Rotator cuff tears are extremely common, affecting millions of Americans each year. They can result from a sudden injury (acute tear) or develop gradually from repetitive overuse and aging (degenerative tear). The supraspinatus tendon is the most frequently torn.

What Does It Feel Like?

- A dull ache deep in the shoulder, often worse at night
- Pain when reaching overhead, behind the back, or across the body
- Weakness when lifting the arm or rotating it
- A crackling sensation with shoulder movement
- Difficulty sleeping on the affected shoulder
- With complete tears: an inability to raise the arm at all

Surgery vs. Physical Therapy — Which Do I Need?

Not all rotator cuff tears require surgery. Many partial tears and even some full-thickness tears in less active individuals respond very well to physical therapy. Surgical repair is typically recommended when:

- A complete tear causes significant weakness or loss of function
- The tear resulted from an acute trauma (fall or injury)
- Conservative treatment has failed after 3–6 months
- The patient is young and active

Recovery After Surgical Repair

Phase 1 — Protection (weeks 0–6):

- Arm in a sling; passive motion only — the therapist moves the arm, not you
- No active lifting or reaching

Phase 2 — Active motion (weeks 6–12):

- Gradually begin moving the arm independently
- Progressive range-of-motion exercises

Phase 3 — Strengthening (months 3–6):

- Rotator cuff and scapular strengthening
- Functional activities reintroduced gradually

Phase 4 — Return to full activity (months 6–12):

- Sport- or work-specific training
- Full recovery typically takes 9–12 months

When Should I Be Concerned?

- Complete loss of arm movement following injury
- Severe swelling, bruising, or deformity
- Signs of infection after surgery: fever, redness, discharge
- Sudden severe pain after a fall or trauma

The Good News

Whether treated conservatively or surgically, rotator cuff injuries respond very well to physical therapy. PT restores strength, flexibility, and mechanics — and in many cases, patients recover fully without ever needing surgery. Early treatment leads to better, faster outcomes.

With surgical repair and dedicated PT, most patients achieve full function within **9 to 12 months**.

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