

My Shoulder Aches at Night

Understanding Nighttime Shoulder Pain

Why Does My Shoulder Hurt Most at Night?

Nighttime shoulder pain is one of the most common and frustrating complaints in physical therapy. You may get through the day with manageable discomfort — but the moment you lie down, the pain intensifies and interrupts your sleep. This pattern is actually a helpful diagnostic clue: it strongly points to specific structures in the shoulder that are aggravated by changes in position, circulation, and pressure at rest.

What Is Most Likely Causing This?

Rotator cuff tear or tendinopathy (most common cause of night pain):

- Inflammation in the tendons or a partial/full tear creates pain that worsens when lying on the shoulder
- Circulation patterns change at rest, and inflammatory chemicals accumulate in the tendon overnight

Shoulder bursitis:

- The bursa (fluid-filled sac) becomes inflamed and is compressed when lying on the shoulder
- Often accompanies impingement

Frozen shoulder (adhesive capsulitis):

- Night pain — often severe — is a hallmark of the freezing stage
- Accompanied by progressive loss of motion in all directions

Shoulder arthritis:

- Arthritic pain often worsens at night as the joint stiffens with inactivity

Cervical spine referral:

- A nerve compressed in the neck can cause deep shoulder aching at rest

What Does It Feel Like?

- A deep, dull ache that intensifies when lying down
- Unable to sleep on the affected side — or woken up when rolling onto it
- Pain that wakes you in the middle of the night
- Morning stiffness and soreness that eases after moving around
- The need to prop the arm with pillows to find a comfortable position

Practical Tips for Sleeping Better Now

- Sleep on your back with the affected arm supported on a pillow beside you
- If side-sleeping, sleep on the GOOD shoulder with a pillow hugged in front
- Avoid sleeping with the arm raised overhead — increases tension on the cuff
- A recliner position (30–45°) is often the most comfortable for inflamed shoulders

When Should I Be Concerned?

- Night pain accompanied by unexplained weight loss, fever, or fatigue — needs medical evaluation
- Constant pain that never varies with position — possible serious underlying cause
- Rapidly worsening weakness alongside the pain

The Good News

Night pain almost always improves as the underlying shoulder condition is treated. Physical therapy addresses the source directly — reducing tendon inflammation, restoring mechanics, and rebuilding strength. As the shoulder heals, nighttime pain is typically one of the first symptoms to resolve.

The encouraging news: as treatment progresses, nighttime shoulder pain is typically **one of the first symptoms to resolve**.

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