

My Shoulder Keeps Popping Out

Understanding Shoulder Instability & Dislocation

What Is Shoulder Instability?

The shoulder is the most mobile joint in the body — and that mobility comes at the cost of stability. Shoulder instability occurs when the ball of the upper arm (humeral head) moves excessively in the socket, or partially or fully slides out (subluxation or dislocation). Once it happens once, the risk of recurrence is high — especially in young, active individuals.

A dislocation means the ball has fully come out of the socket. A subluxation means it partially slipped and then returned on its own. Both damage the labrum, ligaments, and sometimes the bone, making future episodes more likely.

What Does It Feel Like?

- A feeling that the shoulder is "loose," "slipping," or about to come out
- An actual episode where the arm pops out — often requiring medical reduction (putting it back in)
- Apprehension — fear and guarding when the arm is in certain positions (especially overhead and rotated outward)
- A clicking, clunking, or catching sensation with movement
- Pain and achiness after activities that stress the shoulder
- Numbness or tingling in the arm following a dislocation

Who Is Most at Risk?

- Young athletes under 25 — very high re-dislocation rate (up to 90% without surgery in this group)
- Contact sport athletes — football, wrestling, rugby, hockey
- People with naturally loose joints (generalized ligamentous laxity)
- Prior shoulder dislocation — the most significant risk factor for future dislocation

Surgery vs. Physical Therapy

For a first-time dislocation in an older, less active patient, PT is often sufficient. For young athletes with traumatic dislocations, surgical stabilization (Bankart repair) is frequently recommended due to the very high recurrence rate. PT is essential both as primary treatment and after any surgical repair.

When Should I Seek Immediate Care?

- The shoulder has dislocated and not returned to place — do not force it back yourself
- Numbness, tingling, or weakness in the arm after a dislocation (possible nerve injury)
- Significant bruising and swelling after a shoulder injury

The Good News

Whether managed with PT or surgery followed by PT, shoulder instability is very treatable. A comprehensive rotator cuff and scapular strengthening program significantly reduces the risk of future episodes by providing dynamic stability to the joint. Many patients return to full sporting activity with confidence.

With the right program, most patients successfully **return to full sport** and daily activities with significantly reduced risk of re-dislocation.

This information is for general educational purposes only and is not a substitute for a professional evaluation. Call us today — we have immediate openings with no waitlist.

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