

AC Joint Sprain & Separation

What You Need to Know

What Is the AC Joint?

The acromioclavicular (AC) joint is where the collarbone (clavicle) meets the top of the shoulder blade (acromion). It is held together by several ligaments and provides the shoulder with important stability, particularly during overhead and pushing movements. AC joint injuries range from minor sprains (ligaments stretched) to complete separations (ligaments fully torn and the joint displaced).

Grades of AC Joint Injury

- Grade I — ligaments stretched, joint intact; local tenderness, minimal swelling
- Grade II — partial tear; some joint widening, visible bump may form, moderate pain
- Grade III — complete ligament tear; significant bump at the shoulder top, collarbone visibly elevated
- Grades IV–VI — rare, severe displacements requiring surgical management

How Does It Happen?

- A direct fall onto the tip of the shoulder — most common (contact sports, cycling accidents)
- A fall onto an outstretched hand that transmits force up to the joint
- A direct blow to the shoulder (tackle, collision)

What Does It Feel Like?

- Pain directly over the top of the shoulder at the AC joint
- A visible or palpable bump at the end of the collarbone (in Grade II+)
- Pain with reaching overhead, across the body, or behind the back
- Pain with sleeping on the shoulder
- Weakness with pushing, pressing, or lifting

Treatment — Surgery vs. Physical Therapy

Grade I and II injuries almost always heal well with conservative treatment. Grade III injuries are often managed conservatively in non-athletes. Grades IV–VI typically require surgical stabilization. Physical therapy is the primary treatment for all grades that do not require surgery.

When Should I Be Concerned?

- Significant deformity at the shoulder top after a fall — needs imaging
- Numbness or tingling in the arm after the injury
- No improvement after 4–6 weeks of conservative management

The Good News

The vast majority of AC joint injuries heal well without surgery. Physical therapy restores strength, motion, and stability effectively. Even Grade III separations — with a visible bump — often return to full function with PT. The bump may remain permanently but is typically painless long-term.

Most Grade I–III AC joint injuries return to full function within **6 to 12 weeks** of physical therapy.

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