

My Shoulder Hurts When I Reach Overhead

Understanding Overhead Shoulder Pain

Why Does Reaching Up Hurt So Much?

Overhead motion is one of the most mechanically complex movements the body performs. The shoulder must coordinate muscle activity across the rotator cuff, scapula, cervical spine, and thoracic spine simultaneously — and the space for the tendons and bursa under the acromion is remarkably narrow. When any part of this system is off — weak, tight, stiff, or inflamed — raising the arm above shoulder height becomes painful.

What Is Most Likely Causing This?

Shoulder impingement (most common):

- Tendons or bursa pinched under the acromion during arm elevation
- Pain typically between 60° and 120° of elevation — the "painful arc"

Rotator cuff tear or tendinopathy:

- Partial or full tear causing weakness and pain at end range overhead
- Often associated with night pain and weakness

AC joint arthritis or injury:

- Pain at the very top of the arc — above 120°, especially crossing the arm across the body

Biceps tendinopathy:

- Pain at the front of the shoulder with overhead and loaded activities

Cervical spine referral:

- A pinched nerve in the neck can mimic shoulder pain and cause overhead symptoms

What Does It Feel Like?

- Pain when reaching into a cupboard, hanging laundry, or putting on a coat
- A sharp or catching pain at a specific point in the range of motion
- Aching that remains for hours after overhead activity

- Weakness — the arm feels heavy or difficult to hold up
- The need to compensate by leaning or tilting the body to reach

What Makes It Worse?

- Reaching overhead or behind the head
- Lifting objects above shoulder height
- Sleeping on the shoulder
- Prolonged sitting with poor posture (rounds shoulders forward)

When Should I Be Concerned?

- Complete inability to raise the arm after an injury — possible full cuff tear
- Numbness or tingling down the arm — possible cervical nerve involvement
- Severe weakness developing quickly

The Good News

Overhead shoulder pain is one of the most responsive conditions to physical therapy. By identifying the exact structure involved, correcting muscle imbalances, improving scapular mechanics, and restoring shoulder mobility, the vast majority of patients regain pain-free overhead function. Many never need imaging or surgery.

Most patients regain comfortable overhead function within **6 to 10 weeks** of targeted physical therapy.

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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