

Shoulder Labral Tear (SLAP Tear)

What You Need to Know

What Is a Labral Tear?

The labrum is a ring of tough cartilage that deepens the shoulder socket and helps keep the ball of the upper arm securely in place. It also serves as an attachment point for the biceps tendon and several ligaments. When the labrum tears, the shoulder can become painful, clicking, and unstable.

A SLAP tear (Superior Labrum Anterior to Posterior) is a specific type of labral tear at the top of the socket where the biceps tendon attaches. It is common in overhead athletes (baseball pitchers, swimmers, volleyball players) and in falls onto an outstretched hand.

What Does It Feel Like?

- A deep aching pain inside the shoulder — difficult to pinpoint exactly
- Clicking, popping, catching, or grinding with shoulder movement
- Pain with overhead activities or throwing
- A feeling of shoulder instability — like the ball might "slip out"
- Pain when sleeping on the shoulder
- Weakness or loss of power in throwing or overhead motion
- Pain with biceps-loaded activities (carrying bags, lifting)

How Did This Happen?

- Acute trauma — a fall on an outstretched arm, a direct blow, or sudden traction on the arm
- Repetitive overhead stress — years of throwing, swimming, or overhead lifting
- Age-related degeneration — the labrum frays and tears with wear over time
- Shoulder dislocation — often damages the labrum simultaneously

Surgery vs. Physical Therapy

Many labral tears, especially degenerative ones, improve significantly with physical therapy alone. Surgery (arthroscopic labral repair) is typically considered when:

- The shoulder is significantly unstable or dislocating
- A high-level athlete needs to return to competitive overhead sport
- Symptoms are severe and have not improved after a dedicated PT program

When Should I Be Concerned?

- The shoulder dislocates or feels completely unstable
- Sudden severe pain following a fall or impact
- Significant weakness or loss of arm function

The Good News

Many patients with labral tears return to full activity with physical therapy alone. PT focuses on strengthening the rotator cuff and scapular stabilizers to compensate for labral laxity and restore dynamic stability to the joint. Even after surgical repair, PT is the key driver of a successful outcome.

With PT — or PT following surgical repair — most patients return to full activity within **6 to 9 months**.

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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