

Shoulder problems are common and are often caused by simple things like taking off your coat or lifting something awkwardly or during sport. As you get older, normal wear and tear can cause your shoulder problem to flare-up now and again, often for no reason.

Shoulder problems should settle within 6 weeks of following the advice provided here.

Should I be resting or moving?

For the first 24 to 48 hours

- Try to rest your shoulder but avoid long spells of not moving at all.
- Try to move your shoulder gently for 10 to 20 seconds every hour when awake.

After 48 hours

- You should try to use your arm more.
- Do whatever you normally would and stay at or return to work. This is important and is the best way to get better.
- Avoid sports or heavy lifting until you have less discomfort and good movement.
- Exercise really helps your shoulder and can relieve pain.

Should I take painkillers?

Painkillers can help you keep moving. However, it is important that if you are already taking medication for something else or have other health problems you check with the pharmacist at your local chemist before taking painkillers for your shoulder problem.

- You can use simple, over-the-counter painkillers (such as paracetamol) or anti-inflammatory medicines (such as ibuprofen) to help your pain. You can take both these medicines together.
 - Always follow the instructions on the packet.
 - You can only take two 500mg paracetamol every four to six hours, and no more than eight 500mg paracetamol in 24 hours. You should not take any more than this amount.
 - You can only take three 400mg ibuprofen a day. You should not take ibuprofen if you have stomach problems such as ulcers, have had a previous allergic reaction to ibuprofen or an injury in the last 48 hours. Always take ibuprofen with or just after food. Don't take ibuprofen if you are pregnant.
 - If you have asthma, ibuprofen may make it worse, but if you have taken it before with no problems then you can safely take it again. If you are not sure, speak to your pharmacist.
 - Take them regularly, not just when you are sore, for the next three to four days only.
- **If you feel you still need pain relief after four days then speak to your pharmacist for advice.**

Should I use ice or a heat pad?

If you have had an injury or a flare-up of an old problem in the last two days, wrap crushed ice in a damp towel and hold it for five to ten minutes against the part of your shoulder that hurts. You can do this every two to three hours. Make sure you use a damp towel between the ice and the skin to avoid ice burn.

Alternatively, you could try sports sprays and gel packs, which do a similar job.

After two days, you may find that heat is more relaxing. You could use a heat pad or a hot water bottle with an insulated cover on it. Make sure this is not too hot and not directly touching your skin. You should do this for 10 to 15 minutes, three to four times a day.

What about work?

You will recover faster and everybody will benefit if you can stay at or get back to work as early as possible. Don't worry if your shoulder still hurts, as you may only have to do light work at first. Try to stay active and remember to keep moving. Speak to your manager about any concerns you may have.

For free and confidential advice about work, call the **Healthy Working Lives Adviceline** on 0800 019 2211.

What about sports?

You should take time before you take part in any sports after a shoulder problem. If you take part in sports too soon you could flare things up. You should have no swelling and have full movement of your shoulder. You should have full or close to full strength. Remember to stretch and warm up fully before sports.

Can my shoulder problem cause trouble anywhere else?

You may feel pains around your shoulder and neck and also in one or both of your arms. This can be due to nerve pain, which often feels hot, burning, shooting, or stabbing. If you have any of these, you may be able to take other, more appropriate medication. You should speak to your doctor about this if you have any of these for over one week.

Do I need to see my doctor?

Not normally. If you follow the right advice and take the right medication, your shoulder problem should improve over the next six weeks.

If you experience any of the following, you need to speak to your doctor.

- Pain that spreads below your elbow and lasts longer than 10 days.
- You are unable to move your arm at all
- You are unable to move your hand above your shoulder.
- Any lumps or bumps, which have suddenly appeared around your shoulder
- Hot, burning, shooting or stabbing pains around your shoulder or into your arm lasting more than one week
- Pain that gets worse and worse.
- Your shoulder problem has not improved within six weeks.

Further information

 [NHS 24 self help guide \(www.nhs24.com/selfhelpguide\)](http://www.nhs24.com/selfhelpguide)

 [Advice on shoulder problems from Arthritis Research UK \(www.arthritisresearchuk.org\)](http://www.arthritisresearchuk.org)

 [Musculoskeletal Zone and smartphone app from NHS inform \(www.nhsinform.co.uk/msk\)](http://www.nhsinform.co.uk/msk)

 [Scottish Centre for Health Working Lives \(www.healthworkinglives.com\)](http://www.healthworkinglives.com)

Facts and figures

- Shoulder problems can affect both shoulders, but rarely do.
- One percent of all GP consultations are about shoulder problems.