



What to expect after rotator cuff surgery

Day of Rotator Cuff Surgery:

Rotator cuff surgery is an outpatient procedure. The surgical procedure usually takes an hour to an hour and a half, depending on the extent of work needed to repair the torn tendons. You will remain at the surgical center or hospital until your pain is adequately controlled.

After surgery your arm will be placed into a sling. A sling that holds the arm slightly away from the side (an abduction sling) is used for rotator cuff repair surgery, as this holds the tendons in a more relaxed position. You will remain in the sling for 3 -4 weeks after surgery.

The First Days after Rotator Cuff Surgery:

The first days after rotator cuff surgery are focused on ensuring that your pain control is adequate. Your doctor will prescribe medications to help with discomfort. Always try to prevent the pain from becoming severe by taking smaller doses of pain medication at the early signs of discomfort, rather than large doses when the pain is more severe. Trying different types of medication can also be helpful; we recommend alternating prescribed narcotic medications with an anti-inflammatory medication. And don't forget about icing the shoulder. Ice application may be the most important part of pain control.

Sleeping at Night:

Sleeping after shoulder surgery can be a challenge. Even a moderate ache in the shoulder can prevent a good night's sleep. Many patients find it most comfortable to sleep in a semi-upright position after rotator cuff surgery; a recliner is perfect. If you don't have a recliner, just get a lot of pillows and create a back rest in bed to allow you to sleep in a seated position with the elbow pointing down. Getting a good night's sleep can do as much for pain control as anything else.

Recovery Phase 1: Passive Motion:

The first phase of recovery is passive motion only. This may last up to 6 weeks, depending on the size and type of rotator cuff tear and the strength of the repair.

Passive motion means the rotator cuff muscles and tendons are not doing any work. When the rotator cuff muscles contract (active motion), you place tension on the repair that was performed and can disrupt the repair. Passive motion means that the shoulder moves without placing tension on the repair.

You will be instructed on how to move your shoulder without contracting the rotator cuff muscles

Recovery Phase 2: Active Motion:

Active motion is initiated when there is sufficient healing of the tendons to allow them to start moving the arm, but before any extra resistance is applied. You may be limited to active motion for up to 12 weeks from the time of surgery. Active motion means that you can move your own arm, but not against resistance.

Recovery Phase 3: Strengthening:

The strengthening phase of recovery is the most important. Because of the injury, surgery, and early phases of recovery, the muscles of the rotator cuff have become weak. Once the repair has adequately healed, it is important to begin strengthening the muscles to allow you to resume your normal activity level.

The rotator cuff muscles do not need heavy weights for effective strengthening. A skilled therapist can instruct you on techniques to isolate the proper muscles for strengthening such that only light resistance bands or weights can provide an excellent workout.

Recovery Phase 4: Full Activity:

Full recovery after rotator cuff surgery often takes 4 to 6 months and in some cases longer. Maximum medical improvement (MMI) can take up to nine to twelve months. The critical factors that determine the length of the recovery are the size of the rotator cuff tear, the ability to adequately repair the tendons, and the commitment to rehabilitation.

Knowing when to progress from one phase of rehab to the next is an art. Not all people will progress through rehab in the same way, and each individual must adhere to their prescribed rehab protocol.

Recovery Phase 1: Surgery – 4 weeks after surgery

This phase involves an independent home exercise program unless preoperatively you had a frozen shoulder then formal physical therapy (with a therapist) will be initiated. The following are exercises you should perform on your own.

1. Squeeze a ball or make a fist with your hand and relax it. This helps to mobilize swelling that is normal after surgery and contracts the muscle of the hand and forearm to prevent atrophy.
2. Move your wrist and fingers to avoid stiffness. This can be done with the sling on.
3. Elbow motion- flex and extend (bend your elbow and try to touch your shoulder with your fingers then straighten your arm as much as you can comfortably). You can remove the sling for this exercise. Pronation and supination of the elbow (turn your palm up (supination) then palm down (pronation)) with or without the sling on.
4. Pendulums (Swaying your body back and forth using the weight of the arm and gravity to passively move the shoulder)
 - Bend at the waist so your arm is dangling down. You may want to hold onto a table or chair for support. Gently rock your body weight from your left to your right foot or in a circular motion to move your arm in circular pattern. Reverse your movement so your arm moves in the opposite direction.
 - Bend at your waist so your arm is dangling down. You may want to hold onto a table or chair for support. Move your body forward and back allowing your arm to swing forward and backward freely.
 - Bend at your waist so your arm is dangling down. You may want to hold onto a table or chair for support. Rock your body side to side allowing your arm to swing freely from side to side.



5. Shoulder shrugs- Seated or standing; lift the shoulders up towards the ears, hold for 1-2 seconds and roll them back trying to touch your shoulder blades together then relax down.

Recovery Phase 2 & 3: 4-12 weeks after surgery

At this point you should be out of your sling and a prescription will be given to start formal physical therapy. This phase is under the care of a physical therapist that you chose or we can try to make a recommendation of a therapist in your area. You can expect to need therapy 2 to 3 times a week for 6 to 8 weeks depending on your progression. As previously mentioned everyone's progression is different!

Recovery Phase 4: Full Activity: 12 weeks to 1 year after surgery

At this point you are usually out of formal physical therapy **but we cannot stress enough the importance of continuing your therapy on your own!!!!** Although the tendon(s) are healed at this time it is necessary to exercise to maintain your motion and improve your strength. By doing the exercises with both of your arms you may be preventing the need to have rotator cuff surgery on your other shoulder.

Some commonly asked questions:

Q: How is the sling supposed to be worn?

A: The sling is worn to abduct the arm away from the body and take tension off the repair. It should be in a comfortable position so you might have to do some fine tuning to find what works best for you.



Q: How do I get dressed?

A: Generally loose fitting buttoned clothing is easier to get on and off. The rule of thumb is first on last off the affected extremity (put the sleeve all the way on your surgically repaired arm then slip your uninjured arm in your shirt). You can use your surgical arm to help button your shirt. As the picture above shows your clothing can go under the sling which you will probably find more comfortable. For women undergarments can be worn as soon as you're comfortable wearing them.

Q: How do I wash, shave or put deodorant on my underarm.

A: It takes practice! Use the time before surgery to practice this and other hygiene activities before you're forced to figure it out after surgery, especially if it's your dominant arm you're having surgery on! By bending over like the doing the pendulums you should be able to access your axillae (underarm). The nonoperative side will actually be harder and you will need to support your operative elbow to perform the task.