

Self-help for Acromioclavicular Joint (ACJ) Sprain

Information for patients

What is an ACJ sprain?

The ACJ is where the collar bone meets the shoulder blade, this is a small joint supported by soft tissues. When you sprain the soft tissues they are over stretched, this causes a reaction in the soft tissues which manifests as pain around the joint.

Contributing factors

- Injury, such as a direct trauma to the area or indirectly by a fall onto the outstretched arm
- Road traffic collisions
- Contact sports
- Weightlifting

When to seek medical attention

- A new lump or bump around the shoulder
- Bruising or redness in and around the joint or new multiple joint swellings
- Feeling unwell with a temperature associated with the onset of this problem
- Loss of feeling and power in the arm
- Power loss associated with trauma or a fall onto an outstretched hand
- Unusual increase in breathlessness, or new persistent cough since the onset of this problem

Symptoms

You may experience pain at the point of the injury or along the top of the shoulder. The joint may be swollen and tender to touch. With minor sprains there is not usually a change in the position of the joint. This may happen with more significant sprains which may need further assessment.

What to expect

A minor sprain is likely to recover well with no complications. As pain improves, you should see a gradual return to normal activity. You should wait 8 to 12 weeks before performing heavy lifting or contact sports.

Management

- Initial rest is advised to your affected shoulder. Early gentle exercise as pain allows is good for the healing process and prevents stiffness

- You could apply an ice pack or bag of frozen peas wrapped in a damp towel to the injury for 20 minutes every two to three hours. Be sure to check the ice does not burn your skin. Do not use if you have any circulatory problems or conditions which stop you sensing cold
- Adequately control your pain. Pain stops you being able to move the arm and may result in the shoulder becoming restricted. Speak to a pharmacist if you are unsure which medication may help
- As pain allows you can begin gentle exercises to encourage range of movement and strength as seen below. Do not force through pain at the extremes of movement
- Initially it is advisable to avoid heavy lifting or contact sport to allow adequate time for recovery
- Try to maintain a good posture

Exercises

Demonstration	Instructions
<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around;"> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>Start position</p> </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>End position</p> </div> </div>	<p>Stand facing a chair or work surface. Place your hands on the secure object and slowly walk backwards to feel your shoulders move; this should be a gentle stretch as tolerated.</p> <p>Hold this position for approximately five seconds and return to the start position. Repeat 10 times, two to three times a day as tolerated.</p>
<div style="text-align: center;">  </div>	<p>Stand tall, ensuring good posture of upper back and neck, maintain relaxed breathing. Draw your shoulder blades backwards and hold for 15 seconds. Repeat five times, two to three times a day as tolerated.</p> <p>Start in the same position as above, but this time aim to roll your shoulder blades backwards in a circular motion. Repeat 10 times, two to three times a day as tolerated.</p>



Stand or sit, ensuring good posture of upper back and neck, gently draw your shoulder blades backwards.

Adopt the position demonstrated in the photograph, with your elbow bent of the affected arm. Use your hand of your unaffected side to gently resist yourself attempting to rotate your arm outwards, while keeping your elbow in by your side. Hold for five seconds. Repeat up to 10-15 times, two to three times a day as tolerated.

Frequently asked questions

Am I damaging my shoulder?

You will not damage your shoulder by performing routine daily chores and tasks as pain allows.

Do I need any investigations?

You may have already had an X-ray if it was indicated. However, if your symptoms have not improved within six weeks, then consult with your health professional.

What can I do if my shoulder does not settle?

If your symptoms have not settled after four to six weeks, you should consider referring yourself to your local physiotherapy department. Physiotherapy self-referral forms are available at your GP reception. Complete the form and return to the reception desk. You will either receive a telephone call or a letter for you to arrange an appointment with the physiotherapist.

This information is available in audio, Braille, large print and other languages. To request a copy, please ask a member of staff.

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