



Ask the Expert

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What is a Frozen Shoulder?

Q: *I injured my left shoulder 6 months ago walking my dog. He's a big beast and while I was chatting with a neighbor he bolted after a squirrel. He lunged so hard I thought my left arm was pulled out of joint. Since then my shoulder has hurt to move and now I can't reach above my shoulder height. My physiotherapist told me my shoulder is frozen and it could take a long time to heal. What exactly is a frozen shoulder? FF – frozen and frustrated*

A: Dear frozen and frustrated – while dog walking is a great way to get some daily exercise, it obviously has its hazards. Frozen shoulder is a common medical problem that is also referred to as adhesive capsulitis. Frozen shoulders are painful and stiff. Over time people with this condition find their shoulder's range of motion can decrease so much they can't do simple things such as comb their hair, do up their bra or put things in their upper cupboards. Frozen shoulder can occur as a result of shoulder trauma but it often develops spontaneously, more commonly in middle aged and older women and in diabetics. Regardless of the cause, in this condition the soft tissue envelope that surrounds the shoulder joint (the joint capsule) may become inflamed causing pain. In addition, the joint capsule itself contracts around the joint, causing loss of range of motion.

Frozen shoulders typically go through 3 phases – 1. Freezing phase; 2. Frozen phase and; 3. Thawing phase. The time it takes to go through these phases is highly individual. The bad news is that frozen shoulder typically lasts for 1 to 3 years before resolving. The good news is that I have rarely seen a frozen shoulder patient that did not have their pain resolve fully and their shoulder range of motion return to normal. The treatment options for this condition are limited. Physiotherapy exercises to maintain or improve your range of motion may be helpful, especially after the initial, most painful phase. Once your range of motion improves, physiotherapy will also contribute to rebuild muscular control around your shoulder girdle. A corticosteroid injection into the shoulder joint will often help to reduce your pain. Rarely, other treatments may include shoulder manipulation under anaesthesia or arthrographic distension of the capsule with saline or air but the evidence on the benefit from these procedures is limited. Over time, this condition will heal spontaneously.

The bottom line is that frozen shoulder is a common medical problem and with time and the right exercises you will eventually be pain free and your range of motion should no longer be limiting. Hopefully you will thaw out before the winter weather freezes the rest of you.

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