

Shoulder Injuries in Active Women

By Todd C. Battaglia, MD, MS

Shoulder injuries are extremely common in many of the most popular recreational activities for women, including swimming, tennis, golf, and skiing. In part, this may be due to the fact that, as a group, women tend to have looser shoulder joints than do men. This often requires the surrounding muscles to work harder to stabilize the shoulder during strenuous activities, and may predispose women to developing shoulder injuries.

Usually, these injuries are secondary to overuse, especially during overhead activities (e.g., crawl or butterfly stroke, tennis serve), and involve inflammation of the tendons around the shoulder, particularly the rotator cuff and biceps. These tendonitis syndromes most often begin gradually, with no obvious inciting event, and cause a deep aching and discomfort with use of the involved muscles and tendons. For rotator cuff injury, pain is typically at the side of the shoulder, and worst with lifting to the side and overhead; with biceps involvement, pain is more common in the front of the shoulder and with lifting in front of the body. Most such problems will respond to rest, ice, anti-inflammatories, and an appropriate rehabilitation program involving stretching and strengthening exercises. More advanced cases may require physical therapy or a steroid injection performed by your physician. Total healing may take anywhere from a few weeks to a few months.

If neglected, overuse injuries may progress to a more serious structural issue, such as a torn rotator cuff. A fall or other acute injury may also lead to similar damage. Tears usually manifest with sharper and more severe pain, pain at rest or at night, and more dramatic strength losses. Unfortunately, many tendon tears around the shoulder will not respond to conservative management and may require surgical intervention to address. Surgical repair of a rotator cuff or biceps tear can almost always be performed arthroscopically, utilizing small incisions and a minimally invasive technique; full recovery, however, may take four to six months.

All athletes should follow basic measures to prevent shoulder injury. These include appropriate warm-up before activity, use of proper exercise techniques, avoidance of overuse through cross-training and alternating sports, and maintenance of shoulder strength through a weight-lifting program. Should you suffer shoulder pain despite these efforts, do not play through pain. See your physician for any shoulder injury involving a discreet pop or tearing sensation, that causes pain that fails to respond to 10-14 days of home treatment, or that causes a significant loss of strength or motion.

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