

What's your sign? Identifying and treating shoulder pain.

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The shoulder is the most mobile joint in the body which allows us to position our arms and hands in space in almost any direction. This mobility is controlled by a complex system of muscles, tendons and ligaments around the shoulder joint that provide a balance of strength and stability that allow us to have the almost limitless function of the arm and hand. Most people take for granted that the shoulder and its surrounding layers of muscles, tendons and ligaments just work to get whatever the job is done. Unfortunately, approximately 25% of people will have some degree of shoulder pain or dysfunction at some point in their lifetime. This can be from a variety of problems in the shoulder. Some shoulder pain is obviously from an injury such as a fall, lifting a heavy object or an accident, but many times shoulder pain or dysfunction comes on gradually without a particular cause. In either case, shoulder problems should never be ignored. Many incidences of shoulder pain are temporary and resolve within days to a few weeks with ice, heat, anti-inflammatory medication and activity modifications with the full return to normal activities. If shoulder pain or any loss of motion or strength persists, worsens or becomes recurrent this is often the warning signs of more serious problems.

It is recommended to seek medical attention after an injury to the shoulder or with persistent or recurrent shoulder pain because many problems are easier to treat before they become chronic. It is very important to correctly diagnose the source of any shoulder pain or dysfunction before initiating treatment. This can typically be done with a physical exam by a shoulder specialist along with X-rays and sometimes additional diagnostic studies such as an MRI or CT scan. There are a number of different problems that can create similar pain and dysfunction in and around the shoulder, everything from pinched nerves in the neck to congenital variations in the bones of the shoulder and arm. Making the right diagnosis is critical to initiating the proper treatment for any shoulder problem.

Many common shoulder problems, such as muscle strains, tendonitis, bursitis or early arthritis can be treated and managed conservatively with a variety of treatments such as medication, injections, physical therapy and activity modifications to help prevent further or future problems in the shoulder. The most conservative treatment options with the least risk are always the best first line of treatment. Sometimes there are multiple conservative treatment options that work well together, such as a steroid injection and physical therapy for rotator cuff tendonitis to reduce inflammation and restore range of motion, strength, endurance and function. All the while being proactive to prevent future recurrence of the same problem by re-training the patient and their shoulder how to have normal function in a way that is less likely to lead to recurrent injury.

Some shoulder problems, such as a full thickness rotator cuff tear, recurrent shoulder dislocations, or progressive shoulder arthritis require surgical intervention to correct a more structural problem that will not heal or recover on its own or with non-operative treatment. Almost all of the these problems can now be managed with arthroscopic or minimally invasive surgical techniques as a day surgery procedure. State of the art technology such as pencil size HD cameras, specialized instruments, bio-composite implants, high tensile strength suture materials and better anesthesia techniques and medications allow us to perform surgical procedures less invasive, faster, with lower risk and better results. There is also exciting research underway on new medications and biologics that may improve the healing process and recovery time of tendons and ligaments as well as reduce the amount of pain, stiffness and swelling that occurs after surgery. These types of new technologies are constantly being evaluated and integrated into patient care as they become available and prove their benefit to patient care and improved outcomes.

We are fortunate in our community to have many places to turn for orthopedic care. When seeking medical treatment for shoulder pain, be sure to select the physician who is most highly qualified through advanced training in the latest techniques and in experience. Take time to ask about medical school education, areas of specialization, residency training, and experience with your particular issue. Dr. Harris is board certified in orthopedic surgery and sports medicine. He is fellowship-trained in sports medicine and arthroscopic surgery of the shoulder. Dr. Harris is a highly regarded expert in shoulder repair and reconstruction. Whether you are suffering from shoulder arthritis, pain and instability, sports injury or fracture, his training and experience can diagnosis, treat and manage your issue to get you back to the activities you love. To read more information about Dr. Howard Harris, visit us online at: www.dfwshoulderexpert.com.



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