

# Painful Shoulder

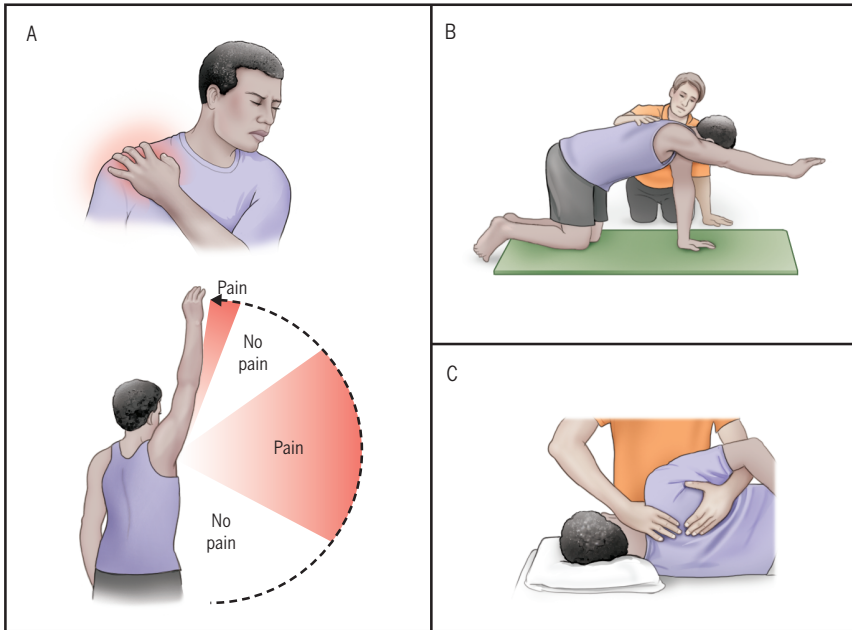
## *Exercise Can Reduce Pain and Improve Mobility and Function*

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**S**houlder pain is common, especially as we age. Pain that limits your ability to raise your arm above your head or rotate your shoulder is called “subacromial shoulder pain.” Other names you may hear include rotator cuff tendinopathy, subacromial impingement syndrome, or rotator cuff–related shoulder pain. You may feel this type of pain

during everyday activities, such as getting dressed.

The good news is that most people with subacromial shoulder pain improve with physical therapy. A review of the most up-to-date research published in the March 2020 issue of *JOSPT* concluded that shoulder exercises are the best way to manage this pain.



**ADDRESSING SHOULDER PAIN.** Shoulder pain that limits your ability to raise your arm or rotate your shoulder, as shown here (from between 45° and 60° to 120° and from 170° to 180°), is often called “subacromial shoulder pain” (A). Exercises that focus on strengthening your shoulder and shoulder blade are most likely to reduce pain and improve mobility. Your physical therapist will supervise these exercises in the clinic and may ask you to perform some of them at home to improve your results (B). Manual therapy of the shoulder can also be effective when combined with shoulder exercises (C).

This *JOSPT* Perspectives for Patients is based on a literature review by Pieters et al titled “An Update of Systematic Reviews Examining the Effectiveness of Conservative Physical Therapy Interventions for Subacromial Shoulder Pain” (*J Orthop Sports Phys Ther 2020;50(3):131-141. https://doi.org/10.2519/jospt.2020.8498*).

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### NEW INSIGHTS

The authors of the *JOSPT* review analyzed 202 systematic reviews published between 2012 and 2018 for quality and relevance. Sixteen reviews were included. The strongest recommendation was for shoulder exercises that were supervised in the clinic or performed at home. Different types of shoulder exercises reduced pain, improved shoulder movement, and increased shoulder function. The most common exercises prescribed included strengthening the muscles around the shoulder and shoulder blade, as well as exercises to improve shoulder mobility or quality of movement.

For patients with persistent shoulder pain, exercise therapy was just as effective as a corticosteroid injection in the short term and shoulder decompression surgery in the long term. In addition to shoulder exercises, manual therapy can help to decrease pain and improve shoulder mobility. The authors also recommended against using laser, ultrasound, extracorporeal shockwave, or pulsed electromagnetic energy therapy to treat subacromial shoulder pain, due to the lack of supporting evidence.

### PRACTICAL ADVICE

Shoulder exercises are as effective as shoulder surgery and injections, and are less expensive and unlikely to generate negative side effects. They also offer the general health benefits of exercise.

To help guide your treatment and tailor a program to your needs, your physical therapist will discuss your concerns with you and perform a thorough evaluation. Depending on the findings, you may be prescribed different shoulder-strengthening and/or mobility exercises, which may be combined with manual therapy.



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