

A frozen shoulder (adhesive capsulitis)

A frozen shoulder (adhesive capsulitis) is a painful, persistent stiffness of the shoulder joint. This makes it very difficult to carry out the full range of normal shoulder movements.

You may find it difficult to carry out everyday tasks, such as:

- dressing
- driving
- sleeping comfortably

Some people find they are unable to move their shoulder at all, which is why the condition is called a frozen shoulder.

Painkillers may help to ease the pain.

It may also be helpful to see a physiotherapist for advice on exercises and pain relief.

A frozen shoulder usually gets better itself over a period of 18 months to 3 years.

Stages of frozen shoulder

The symptoms of a frozen shoulder progress slowly and usually go through 3 separate stages. The stages can take over a number of months or years to go through. However, the symptoms of frozen shoulder can vary greatly from person to person.

The three stages of frozen shoulder are:

- stage 1 (freezing)
- stage 2 (frozen)
- stage 3 (thawing)

Stage 1 (freezing)

During stage 1, your shoulder may start to ache and feel stiff before becoming very painful. The pain is often worse at night and when you lie on the sore side. This stage can last 2 to 9 months.

Stage 2 (frozen)

Stage 2 is known as the adhesive or frozen stage. Your shoulder may become increasingly stiff, but the pain will not usually get worse. Your shoulder muscles may start to waste slightly because they are not being used. This stage can last 4 to 12 months.

Stage 3 (thawing)

Stage 3 is the recovery or thawing stage. During this stage, you will gradually regain movement in your shoulder. The pain will begin to fade, although it may still hurt at times especially if you jerk your arm. Although you may not regain full movement of your shoulder, you will be able to do many more tasks. Stage three can last 5 months to 3 or 4 years

Early stage

The early stage of a frozen shoulder is the most painful stage. If you are in the early stage of a frozen shoulder, you might want to avoid movements that make the pain worse for any length of time, such as stretching overhead. However, do not stop moving altogether. Treatment during this stage is mainly focused on relieving the pain.

Later stages

After the first, painful stage, stiffness is the main symptom of a frozen shoulder. At this time, shoulder exercises should be done to increase your movement.

Treatment

While treatment may not necessarily speed up your recovery, it can make it more bearable. Treatment varies depending on the stage of the condition and how bad your pain and stiffness is. The aim of treatment is to keep your joint as mobile and pain free as possible while your shoulder heals.

Corticosteroid injections

If you have a severe case of frozen shoulder, treatment using painkillers may not be enough to control the pain. If this is the case, a steroid and local anaesthetic (painkiller) injected into and around your shoulder joint may help relieve pain. It may also improve the movement in your shoulder. This can be done by your physiotherapist or GP. However, the injections cannot cure your condition and your symptoms may gradually return. Steroid injections will also not be used once the pain has faded from your shoulder when only the stiffness remains. Too many steroid injections can cause damage to your shoulder, so you may only be able to have this type of treatment up to three times. You will need at least 3 to 6 weeks between injections.

Shoulder exercises

It is important to keep your shoulder joint moving with regular, gentle exercise. Not using your shoulder can cause your muscles to waste and may make stiffness worse. So, if you can, keep using your shoulder as normal. However, if your shoulder is very stiff, exercise may be painful. You can discuss pain medication with your GP.

Your GP or physiotherapist can give you exercises that you can do that may help to reduce pain and increase movement.

You can find some [simple exercise to get you started](#) in the Musculoskeletal (MSK) zone on NHS inform.

Further information

If you have a muscle, bone or joint problem, visit the [MSK Zone](#) on NHS inform for self-management advice and exercises to get you moving normally, and safely.