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## **Rotator Cuff Repair Postoperative Rehabilitation Protocol**

You have been diagnosed as having a rotator cuff tear. A rotator cuff tear is an injury to one or more tendons of the rotator cuff. The Rotator cuff is a group of muscles that provides strength and stability to the shoulder. When the rotator cuff tears, often the tendon begins to pull away from its normal attachment to the humerus bone and this will often produce pain and weakness of the shoulder. Often surgery is required in order to reattach the rotator cuff tendons. This protocol describes the usual postoperative regimen for patients who choose to undergo rotator cuff repair surgery. It is very important to follow the protocol carefully in order to maximize your results and prevent complications. Failure to do so may compromise your results and may cause your surgery to be unsuccessful.

### **Before surgery**

Our surgery schedulers will schedule your surgery at either a hospital or a surgery center, depending upon your preference. You may be required to contact your primary care physician prior to surgery to obtain medical clearance. If required to do this, please contact them as soon as possible or your surgery may need to be cancelled if there are any problems. You will be told what time to arrive, usually 1 to 2 hours before the start of the procedure. Please arrive on time. It is best to wear loose fitting clothes, and for shoulder surgery it is often a good idea to have a shirt or jacket that buttons or zips up in the front.

Rotator cuff repair surgery is usually done under a general anesthetic. This means you will go to sleep. However, before you are brought in to the operating room, the anesthesiologist will also perform a nerve block for your shoulder to help with postoperative pain. I strongly recommend that you have this done because it will virtually eliminate post-operative pain for the first 12-24 hours after surgery, and this will allow you to go home the same day as surgery. The surgery generally takes between 1 and 3 hours depending on the severity of the tear.

When you wake up your arm will likely be numb from the block. Your arm will be in a shoulder immobilizer, or sling or brace. You will also have icepacks or a cold therapy device that you can take home with you. For the first 12-24 hours it is a good idea to have someone with you.

### **Wound care**

Most patients who have an arthroscopic repair will have between 3 and 7 small incisions around their shoulder. Occasionally absorbing sutures are used. In either case you can remove the postoperative bandage after 2 days and cover the incisions with small water proof band-aids. These should be changed daily. It is ok to shower after your first dressing change. It is ok if the incisions get a little wet in the shower, but you should not keep a wet bandage on the incision. It is ok to wash the incisions with antibacterial soap and dry thoroughly after your shower. You should not swim or soak the incisions until after your sutures have been removed. Some drainage from the incisions is normal for the first 2-4 days. If there is no drainage on the band-aids for two days in a row, they can be left open to air. If the drainage persists beyond a few days or you have increasing pain or redness or drainage, you should contact my office.

## **Maximal protective phase 0-6 weeks**

### **0-2 weeks**

The first 6 weeks after surgery are critical in ensuring healing of your rotator cuff. This is called the maximal protective phase. The goals of this phase are to protect the repaired tissue from stress and allow for healing but also gradually increase shoulder range of motion. In order to accomplish this **you will be required to wear the sling or abduction brace all of the time except for bathing and therapy**. You will not be allowed to use the arm for any active range of motion. This means that you cannot move your shoulder away from your body for the first six weeks. Passive motion is allowed. In other words, you cannot move your shoulder yourself actively, but it is ok to move your arm using your opposite arm. It is also permissible to use your hand and elbow, as long as you do not move your upper arm away from your body. You should sleep in your brace for the first six weeks. **You can remove the brace for showering and dressing, but you should let your arm hang down by your side and you should not move the arm away from our body when you do this.** You should use ice as much as you need to help control pain and swelling. You should not use heat for the first two weeks.

### **2-6 weeks**

You should make your first post-operative appointment at around 2 weeks after surgery. Your sutures will be removed and you will be given a copy of our post-operative physical therapy protocol. Our staff will assist you in finding a physical therapist. You should bring a copy of our protocol to your therapist on your first visit. For the first six weeks after surgery your therapist will be focusing on passive range of motion exercises. This means that your therapist will be moving your arm away from your body, but you should not try to move it your self. Your therapist will also give you some exercises that you can do at home. You should continue to use your abduction brace at all times, day and night, except when bathing, dressing, or when doing therapy. It is also permissible to remove the sling when you are seated in a chair, or at mealtime, so long as you do not actively move your shoulder away from your body.

### **Active motion phase 6-12 weeks**

The goals for the next phase are to continue to improve range of motion of your shoulder and allow for further healing of your rotator cuff but avoid over stressing the healing tissue. At this point we will usually have a follow up visit to assess your progress in terms of motion. You will be able to discontinue your sling or shoulder brace. You will be able to use your arm actively. You will be allowed to attempt to lift your arm above your head. You will be allowed to use your arm for light activities. However you should not do any heavy lifting. You should not support your body weight with your arm. You should avoid any sudden jerking motions to your shoulder. You are encouraged to use your shoulder for light activities and begin reaching away from your body. Your therapist will begin to add more active exercises.

### **Strengthening phase 12-16 weeks**

The goals for this phase are to achieve and maintain maximal range of motion and begin to restore shoulder strength power and endurance, and to gradually return to normal activity. By this time your repair should be fully healed. Your therapist will add progressive strengthening exercises. You should still avoid heavy lifting, overhead lifting, and avoid repetitive overhead activity. You should also still avoid sudden pushing or jerking motions.

### **Recovery phase 16 weeks -1year**

It takes many months to fully recover from rotator cuff surgery. Your shoulder can continue to improve for up to two years after surgery. During this time you should continue on a program of stretching and strengthening exercises on your own. You should gradually resume normal activities and sports, although you should wait at least 6-9 months before returning to heavy competitive sports.