

A PATIENT GUIDE TO HOW TO BE NICE TO YOUR SHOULDER

Joshua Thomas, DO
Glacial Ridge Health System
320.634.5157

What is this guide about?

Shoulder problems are very common and the probability of you having shoulder problems as you get older, or if you participate in sports, can be high. This patient guide will help you prevent shoulder pain, and also help you avoid pain if you have shoulder problems, by demonstrating the proper exercises and movements to perform.

What motions should I do if I have pain?

Generally, the last thing you should do if you are having shoulder pain is to "baby it" and not try to move it. If you have pain it is important for you to try to keep your shoulder moving to avoid future severe pain and sudden stiffness. Sometimes shoulders become painful and stiff for no reason and this is called a "frozen shoulder". See the Patient Guide to Frozen Shoulders. If you fall or have an injury that prevents you from moving your shoulders, then you should see a professional about the possible injuries.

There are a few exercises that you should do if you are having shoulder pain. By slowly raising your hand above your head, the affected shoulder will elevate (**Figure 1**). Next, place the back of your hand behind your back at waist level and slowly slide it up your back (**Figure 2**). Next, place your hands behind your head and slowly rotate your shoulders upward (**Figure 3**).

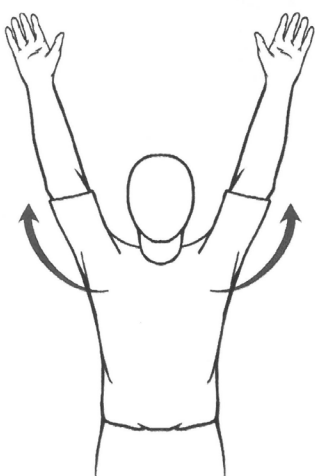


Figure 1

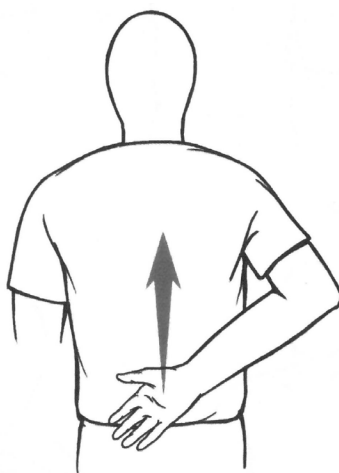


Figure 2

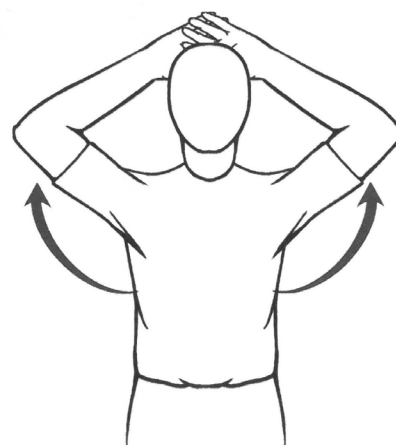
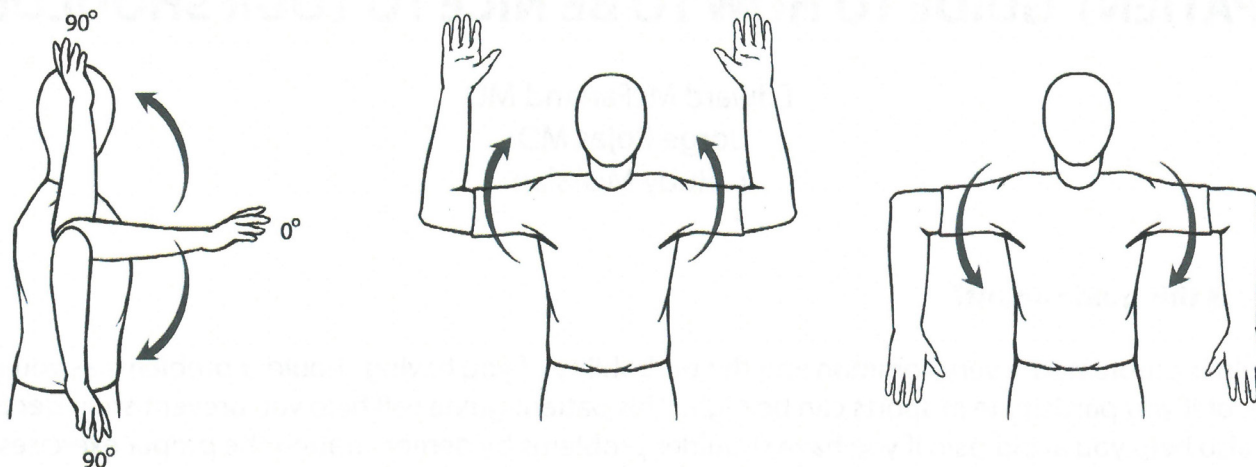


Figure 3



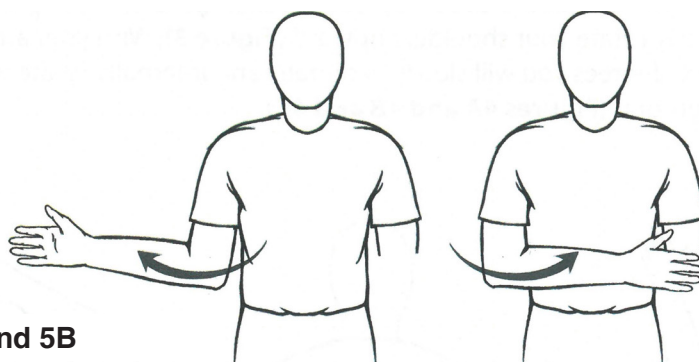
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With your arms outstretched and your elbows bent at 90 degrees, you will slowly externally and internally rotate your shoulder with your arms parallel to the ground. (**Figures 4A, 4B, 4C**).

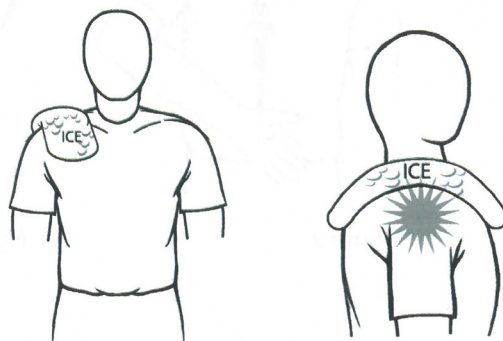


Figures 4A, 4B, and 4C

With your arm perpendicular to the ground with your elbow at your side, the proper exercise to loosen and rotate your shoulder internally (toward your body) and externally (away from your body) is shown in **Figures 5A and 5B**. If your shoulder is getting stiff, applying heat before stretching might help. For pain, "icing" your shoulder with an ice pack draped over your shoulder is recommended for 20 to 30 minutes once or more times a day (**Figures 6A and 6B**). It is important when icing your shoulder to make sure the ice bag covers the front, the top, and the back of the shoulder joint. Generally, ice is better than heat for shoulder pain, but it is your preference and you should use whichever makes your shoulder have less pain.



Figures 5A and 5B



Figures 6A and 6B



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What motions and activities are bad for my shoulder?

Generally, there are no bad motions for the shoulder and it is important to maintain your range of motion. The major goal should be to prevent stiffness. The second goal is to avoid activities that puts too much stress on your shoulder. As we get older our shoulders generally are unable to handle added stress. After surgery or when we do not use our shoulders regularly, any added stress can be painful.

There are activities which can make your shoulder hurt especially if you try to perform them when you have never tried them or if you have not done them in a long period of time. Generally your shoulder will not take large amounts of new stress over a short period of time if it is not ready. The result will often be pain and if you do not move your shoulder, then subsequent loss of range of motion can occur.

Why is lifting over shoulder level bad for the shoulder?

There are three activities that are hard on your shoulder. The first is lifting things over shoulder level **(Figure 7)**. Anyone who has had shoulder pain will tell you that it typically hurts if you lift objects above your shoulder. This activity creates a lot of stress on the group of muscles and tendons that surround your shoulder called the "rotator cuff". As a result, the "military press" or exercises known as inclines or declines are particularly hard on your shoulders.

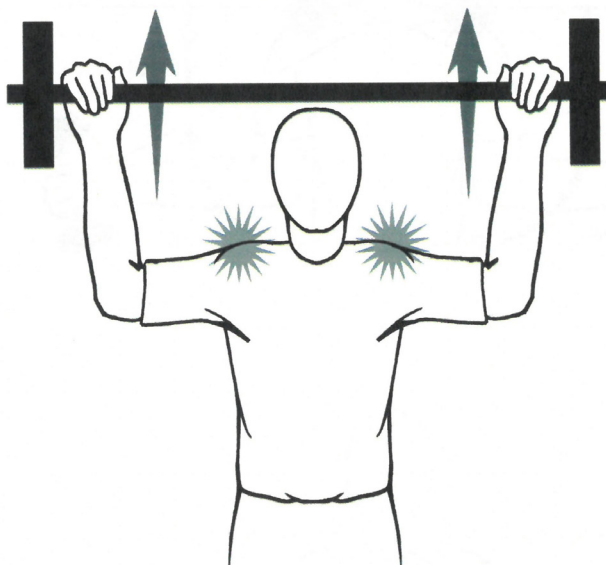


Figure 7



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You should avoid lifting objects greater than 70 degrees above the ground approximately the level of your waist (**Figures 8A, 8B, and 8C**). You should also avoid lifting things far away from your body where your elbows are extended. When exercising with weights, they should be done with your arms bent and your elbows at your side, not with your arms extended or straight.

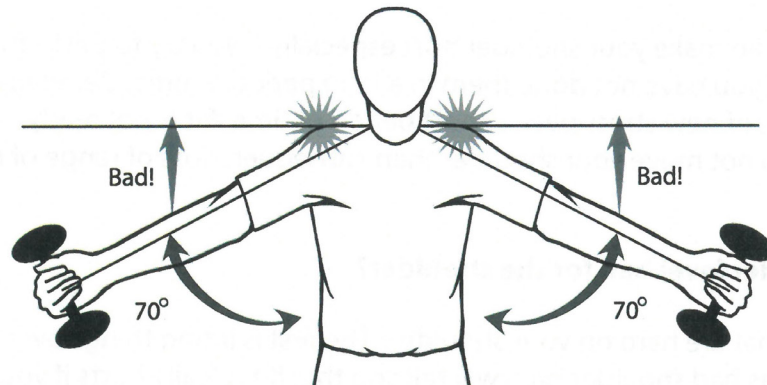


Figure 8A

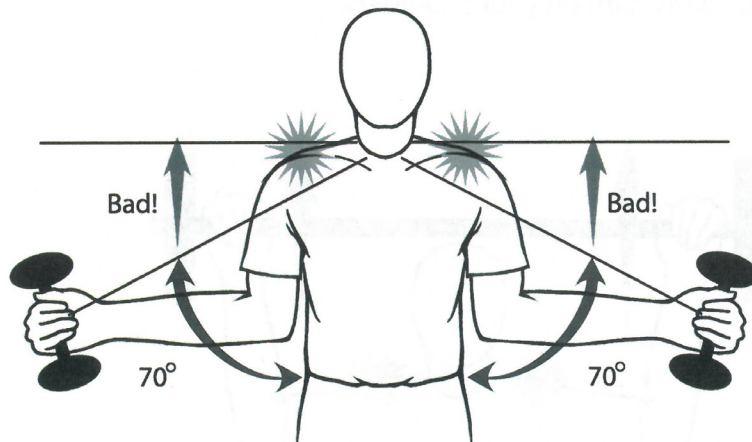


Figure 8B

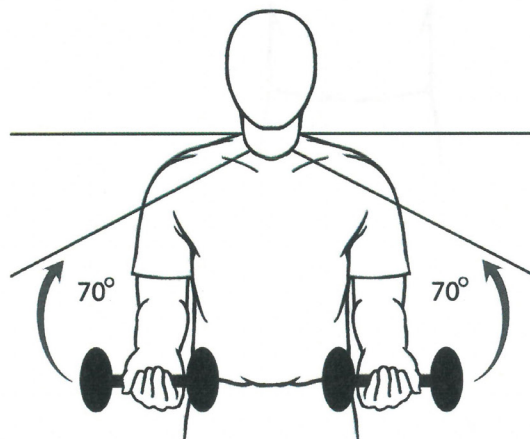


Figure 8C



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Often people with shoulder problems can lift objects that are quite heavy if they bring the object close to their bodies. While it may be difficult to lift a weight away from your body, it is possible to pick up fairly sizeable weight close to your body. **(Figures 9A and 9B).**

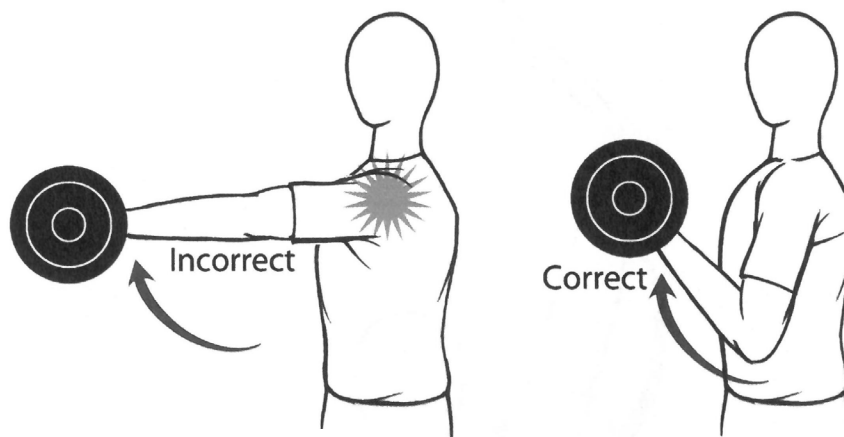


Figure 9A and 9B

What about exercises that subject my shoulders to full body weight?

If you have shoulder problems, then subjecting your shoulder to full body weight can increase the pain or lead to pain. Because they put your full body weight on your shoulders, the three exercises that cause the most problems include push-ups, pull-ups, and body dips. **(Figures 10A, 10B, and 10C).** These exercises can be particularly stressful on your "AC joint" which is the junction of the acromion (the highest point of your shoulder) and your collarbone or clavicle. Similarly, some yoga positions might require you to support your whole body. The exercises mentioned above can be modified so that they are not full body weight on your shoulder. If in doubt, and the exercise hurts, do not do it.



Figure 10A

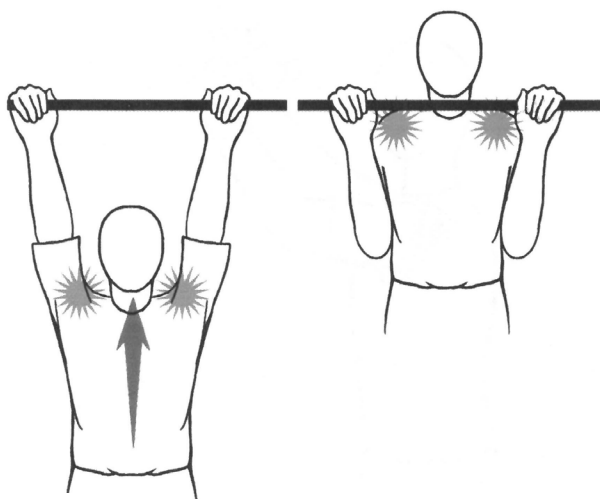


Figure 10B

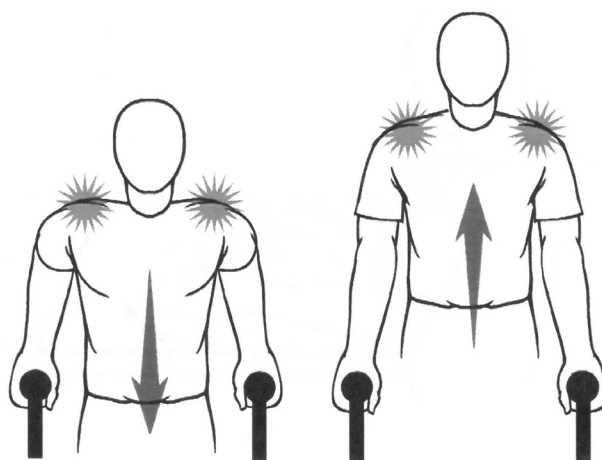


Figure 10C



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Similarly, you should not do stretchy band exercises above shoulder level with your arms outstretched above your head (**Figure 11**) because these can increase your shoulder discomfort.

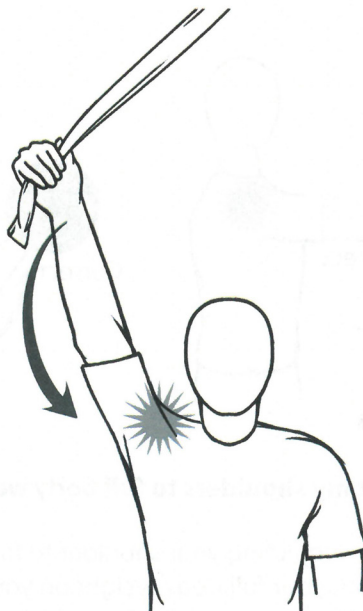


Figure 11

What about lifting away from my body?

Activities of daily living can be very stressful on your shoulder because the muscles and tendons of your rotator cuff have to work hard to keep things lifted away from your body. Examples of these that may cause pain include: lifting a quart of milk from the back of your refrigerator, lifting a child out of a crib, wiping motions such as cleaning windows or tabletops (**Figure 12A**), using a hammer above your shoulder (**Figure 12B**), or exercising with weights with your elbows extended (**Figure 9A** on page 5).



Figure 12A

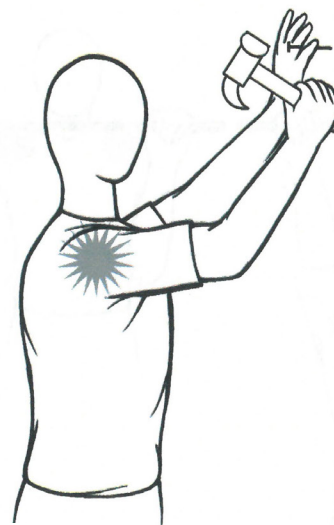


Figure 12B



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What kinds of exercises can I do with a bad shoulder?

Generally, you can do anything that does not aggravate the shoulder. As one gets older, getting in shape for a sport, aerobic activity, and exercising is important for maintaining health. People who have shoulder pain or conditions can do most aerobic activities. These include walking, running, bicycling, exercise bicycling, stair climbers, ellipticals, or treadmills. Kayaking and rowing are typically okay as long as your arms are not lifted high during the stroke. Sports which involve overhead activity can be done as long as they do not hurt. Golf can typically be performed whether the rotator cuff is torn or intact. When swimming, breast stroke is less stressful than freestyle or other strokes. Overhead sports like volleyball, baseball, softball, racquetball, tennis, or pickle ball can be stressful on the shoulder. These should be done only if they do not cause pain.

What kinds of exercises can I do with a bad shoulder?

We promote a concept of "good pain - bad pain" and would refer you to a publication on this topic (see below). "Good pain" is the burn or muscle fatigue you get after a workout or exercise. It should not last long and should not require medication or changing your sport or activity. "Bad pain" is pain that lasts for days, requires medication, awakens you at night, occurs at rest, worsens over time, and prevents you from doing things such as activities of daily living, sports, or hobbies. If this "bad pain" or chronic pain is making you miserable, we suggest that you see a health care professional.

If you have any questions, please contact my office at 320.634.5157.

REFERENCE:

McFarland, Edward G., Stephen P. Compton, and Christopher A. Dawson. "Guide to good and bad pain for the health/fitness professional." *ACSM's Health & Fitness Journal* 7, no 4 (2003): 11-16



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