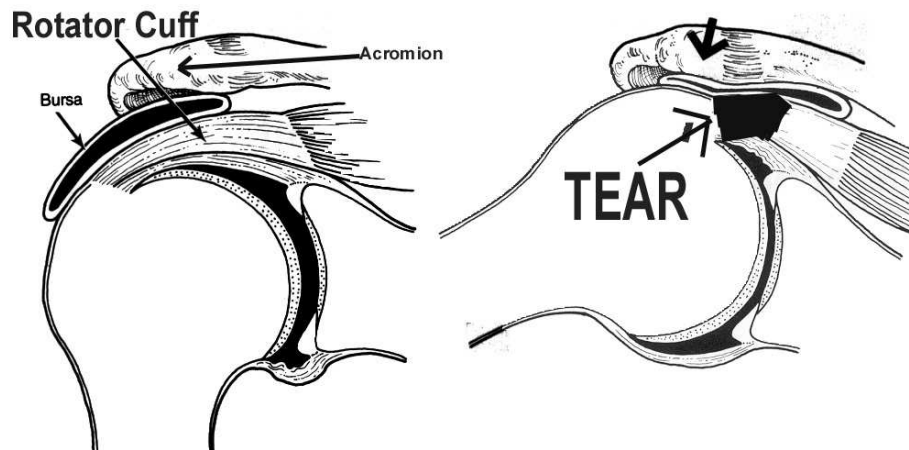


PATIENT NOTES

ROTATOR CUFF TEARS IN THE OLDER PERSON

The Rotator Cuff muscles surround the shoulder joint and function to elevate the arm and provide strength to the shoulder. As one gets older the muscles degenerate and become thinner. The muscles are also worn down by the Acromion bone which rubs on the Rotator Cuff as one elevates the arm.

Eventually the muscle and tendon unit tears. It should be noted that at least 50% of persons older than 60 years have torn Rotator Cuffs and the majority of those persons have not got symptoms.



Symptoms vary and depend on the size and extent of the tear. As a general rule, pain is caused by inflammation of the torn muscle. Weakness and loss of power and movement, is a function of the size of the tear. Therefore the larger the tear, the poorer the function. A torn Rotator Cuff NEVER heals.

Patients complain of pain with movements of the arm but more particularly pain at night. Loss of movement and power occurs, and is a function of the size of the tear.

We know from experience that in most cases (90%) pain can be controlled by non operative means. This includes hydrocortisone injections (which works to reduce inflammation), anti inflammatory medication and physiotherapy (whereby the muscles that are not torn are taught to take over the function of those that are torn). If the patient has good function then having a small tear is compatible with pain free function if the inflammation can be controlled. Remember many older people have completely pain free Rotator Cuff tears. It is however unlikely that full movement and power will return as the Rotator Cuff never heals

It can take 3 to 6 months for non operative treatment to work.

Age is itself not a contraindication to surgery, but if symptoms can be controlled with non operative treatment measures, and the patient gets a good result, then these measures should be pursued.

If non operative treatment does not relieve symptoms over a 3 to 6 month period (in about 10% of cases) then surgery can be considered.

In the event that there is considerable loss of function, it usually means that the tear is very large. Surgery is, in such cases, generally the best option. This is because without surgery, there is a risk of tear extension and arthritis over many years. It is therefore, recommended that younger persons have surgery, no matter what the size of the tear.

In the event that surgery is required one should be aware that it is a large operative procedure with a 12 month rehabilitation period. In addition surgery is not always successful, especially in the elderly, who have very thin and friable Rotator Cuffs.

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