

MUSCLE STRAIN — SHOULDER & ARM

Pectoralis Strain

Understanding your injury and getting back to full speed

WHAT IS IT?

The pectoralis major is the powerful chest muscle that presses and pulls the arm across the body. Strains happen almost exclusively during heavy pressing — classically the bench press.

A **strain** means muscle fibers were overstretched. We grade strains I–III: **Grade I** — mild, microscopic fiber injury; **Grade II** — moderate, a partial tear with strength loss; **Grade III** — severe, complete disruption.

HOW IT HAPPENS

Bench pressing (especially the lowering phase), dips, or a violent arm-wrestling type load.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE

Sharp chest or front-of-armpit pain during a press, tenderness of the chest muscle, pain with pushing the hands together; bruising of the chest or upper arm in higher-grade injuries.

HOW LONG RECOVERY TAKES

- **Grade I:** 1–3 weeks
- **Grade II:** 4–8 weeks
- **Grade III:** complete tears of the tendon insertion are usually treated surgically in active patients — timely diagnosis matters

TREATMENT

Almost all muscle strains heal without surgery. For the first 72 hours: relative rest, ice 15–20 minutes several times daily, compression, and *gentle* motion — complete rest slows healing. Then a progressive program: pain-free motion → isometrics → strengthening → **eccentric loading** (strengthening the muscle while it lengthens — the phase that prevents re-injury) → sport-specific work.

Progressive pressing rehab from isometrics through dumbbell work, restoring full cross-body stretch before heavy barbell loads.

RETURNING TO SPORT

Return when strength is at least **90% of the other side**, motion is full and pain-free, and you can perform your sport's movements at full speed without hesitation. Returning before the muscle is re-strengthened is the main cause of re-injury.

PREVENTING THE NEXT ONE

Controlled lowering tempo on heavy presses, spotter use, avoiding maximal lifts when fatigued.

WHEN TO CALL US

Bruising tracking down the arm, a change in the chest contour or armpit fold, or weakness pressing — come in promptly; complete tears do best with early surgical repair.

CALL THE OFFICE RIGHT AWAY

Pain not controlled by medication, fever over 101.5°F, spreading redness or warmth, or new numbness or weakness. Direct office line (513) 441-5639; after hours (513) 354-3700.



SCAN FOR THE LATEST VERSION ONLINE

robertpettitmd.com/handouts/pectoralis-strain.pdf

This handout is for general patient education and does not replace personalized medical advice. Always follow the specific instructions given by Dr. Pettit and your care team.