

MUSCLE STRAIN — SHOULDER & ARM

Rotator Cuff Strain

Understanding your injury and getting back to full speed

WHAT IS IT?

The rotator cuff is the sleeve of four muscles that centers the ball in the shoulder socket. A strain is an overstretch or minor fiber injury of the muscle-tendon unit without a structural tear.

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

A spike in overhead work or throwing volume, lifting beyond capacity, or bracing during a fall without structural injury.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE

Aching over the outer shoulder with overhead reach or throwing, pain lying on the shoulder at night, weakness that improves as pain settles.

HOW LONG RECOVERY TAKES

- **Grade I:** 1–3 weeks
- **Grade II:** 3–6 weeks
- **Grade III:** if significant weakness persists beyond 6 weeks, MRI is used to exclude a true rotator cuff tear

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.

Scapular control and progressive cuff strengthening (band external/internal rotation, scaption); throwers add the Thrower's Ten program.

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

Regular cuff and scapular conditioning, managed throwing workloads, sound overhead lifting technique.

WHEN TO CALL US

True inability to raise the arm, significant weakness on testing, or symptoms after age 50 that persist — these warrant imaging to rule out a tear.

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/rotator-cuff-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.