

Regaining Strength After a Rotator Cuff Repair



Whether you have had arthroscopic surgery (the least invasive kind), mini-open or open surgery to repair a rotator cuff tear, it takes at least four to six months to regain much of your strength and range of motion (ROM). Recovering well, however, is as important as recovering quickly.

Therapy after rotator cuff repair proceeds in stages and involves physical therapy. In the first few days after surgery, we will encourage you to move your shoulder through a passive process (passive ROM), and sometimes a continuous passive ROM machine may be used to initiate movement. This minimizes the formation of scar tissue (which can limit motion and thus cause stiffness) while better preparing the shoulder for the strengthening exercises

that follow. Your doctor may recommend medications to relieve pain and inflammation so you can exercise in comfort.

During the next four to six weeks, while you continue a routine of passive ROM exercises, you will also limit the use of your shoulder and keep your arm in a sling most of the time to promote proper healing. Beginning about six weeks after surgery, new exercises will build your strength progressively and increase ROM even further. You typically will be able to drive at this time. At around three months after surgery, we will challenge you again with new exercises to build even greater muscle strength. At that point you should be able to lift something heavier than a cup of coffee. By four to six months after surgery, your healing will be close to complete, but with ongoing physical therapy, you may notice that improvements continue for another half year beyond that.

Returning to normal life after rotator cuff repair surgery is a gradual process. We can design a program of exercises to improve flexibility and strength in the surgically repaired shoulder to enable you to engage in sports and other activities and minimize the likelihood of reinjury to the rotator cuff.