

Peter D. McCann, MD
Shoulder and Elbow Surgery
Director of Orthopaedic Surgery, LHGV
Director of Orthopaedic
Strategic Initiatives, LHGV

PRINCIPLES OF NON-OPERATIVE TREATMENT

While there are some shoulder and elbow conditions that warrant immediate surgical treatment, the vast majority of shoulder and elbow injuries can be successfully treated non-operatively using these four basic principles:

ACTIVITY MODIFICATION: “ACTIVE REST”

Simply put, activity modification means avoiding those activities that exacerbate pain but continuing exercises that don't hurt. Avoiding any painful activities will help to promote your body's natural healing process.

Pain is your body's warning system and should NOT be ignored.

So, if your shoulder hurts when lifting weights overhead, there is no need to stop going to the gym, simply avoid those exercises that are painful and limit strengthening exercises to **below** shoulder level. This program is called “**active rest**.”

MEDICATIONS

1) NSAIDs and Tylenol

If your shoulder or elbow hurts at rest or during simple everyday activities such as washing and dressing, you should take medication to decrease pain. Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) and Tylenol are the mainstay medications for musculoskeletal pain.

Find the NSAID that works best for you.

While all NSAIDs are basically derivatives of aspirin, some versions will work better for you than others.

2) Cortisone

Some conditions, such as shoulder bursitis (Impingement Syndrome), are helped by this anti-inflammatory medication. These injections are recommended **only** after an initial period of rest, activity modification and oral anti-inflammatory medications.

Cortisone injections are limited to 2-3 times every 3 months per site! This is due to the fact that excessive cortisone use may weaken tendons and ligaments.

3) Ortho Biologics

Medications such as Platelet Rich Plasma (PRP), Stem Cell Therapy, and Viscosupplementation have become very popular in recent years. At this time, I do **not** advocate these treatments routinely since clinical reports have not consistently proven their efficacy. I do anticipate that more research will better determine their indications and use.

EXERCISES

1) Rehabilitation

Rehabilitation helps to increase the flexibility and strength of the affected region. The exercise program I recommend is simple and effective, and can be performed anywhere. A physical therapist can also instruct you in additional exercises if desired. The most important point is that the

Exercises should be performed correctly and consistently.

2) Pain

Pain is a sign of injury and damage and should always be avoided during your exercise program. You **do** need to push yourself sufficiently in order to improve your flexibility and strength but you should **not** overdo it and cause pain that persists after exercising and necessitates medication.

Your rehabilitation exercises should be “work” and NOT “torture.”

We all appreciate the difference between the appropriate soreness and fatigue following a good workout and pain that is a consequence of overuse and injury. Paraphrasing the famous statement of former Supreme Court Justice, “It is hard to define pain, but you know it when you feel it.”

3) Closed Chain Exercises

Closed chain shoulder exercises are designed to strengthen muscles without irritating the joint and causing pain. These are exercises where the hands are connected to a stationary object such as the floor, wall, machine, cables or holding and lifting a free weight with two hands. A push-up would be an example of a closed chain exercise because both hands are on the floor. An “open chain” exercise is one where a weight is raised in the isolated hand; i.e. single handed dumbbell lift.

Perform your closed chain exercises BELOW shoulder level.

Always remember to start your training at the lowest weight level. Perform 3 sets of 10 repetitions, and gradually increase the weight **only** if it does **not** cause pain.

RETURN TO ACTIVITY/SPORT

Once you regain normal range of motion and strength in your shoulder or elbow, it's time to gradually return to more vigorous activities. You will know that you have arrived at this phase when you can perform your rehabilitation exercises and closed chain exercises below shoulder level comfortably and **without** pain.

For sporting activities, begin at 25% of your former, normal intensity level. The activity should be pain-free! Afterwards, gradually increase the intensity by 5-10% with each subsequent exercise session until full activity is regained. **Remember**, only graduate to the next intensity level, if there is **no** pain.

This process normally takes 6-8 weeks, so be consistent and patient.