

Physical Therapy Protocol: Nonoperative Treatment of Rotator Cuff Tears

Phase 1: Weeks 0 through 6 – Pain Control and Motion Recovery

Physician Goals: Decrease pain and inflammation, regain pain free normal range of motion

Exercises: Pendulums, passive shoulder range of motion in all planes with goal of regaining painless normal motion including pec minor stretching and posterior capsule stretching, glenohumeral joint mobilizations as needed, periscapular stabilizer strengthening immediately focusing on scapular protraction and retraction, cuff isometrics with ER/IR, begin supine active-assisted range of motion once full painless passive motion is obtained and then progress to supine active range of motion and gradually increase to upright range of motion

Comments: Please educate the patient on the need to avoid aggravating activities during this early phase of PT; the purpose of this first phase is to decrease pain so that we can build strength and endurance comfortably in the following phases.

Total Visits: 12 – Once to twice per week with daily home stretching and scapular stabilizer strengthening 3-4x per week

Phase 2: Weeks 6 through 12 – Strength Recovery

Physician Goals: Gradually increase strength to allow for all activities of daily living with a recurrence in symptoms

Exercises: Continue strengthening scapular stabilizers, once patient able to perform full upright active forward elevation without pain or shoulder shrug progress resistance work with light hand weights or bands and progress as tolerated, start with strengthening in the supine and prone positions and progress to fully upright as strength improves and symptoms remain minimal, increase weight/resistance when 30 repetitions are easy and painless; bicep curls and resisted supination can be introduced

Comments: The purpose of phase 2 is to increase strength so that patients can resume daily activities with minimal symptoms. By the end of this phase, most patients can be transitioned to home exercises alone; only those that have overly demanding occupations (painters, hairstylists, plumbers, electricians, etc) or recreational hobbies (tennis, pickleball, baseball/softball, etc) should continue onto phase 3

Total Visits: 12 – One to two times per week with daily home stretching; strengthening 3x per week including PT

Phase 3: Weeks 12+ – Return to Work and/or Sports

Physician Goals: Gradually increase strength and endurance to allow for regular participation in strenuous overhead activities (whether for work or hobby)

Exercises: Continue strengthening scapular stabilizers, continue to advance strengthening exercises to mimic patient needs – whether that be specific overhead lifting requirements or endurance for all-day shoulder height use. Two hand plyometrics, transition to one hand as tolerated, sport-specific functional movement patterns

Comments: The purpose of phase 3 is to allow those with particularly strenuous occupations or hobbies to resume all activities without an uptick in symptoms. This phase should include development of a shoulder maintenance program that the patient should incorporate into their weekly routine lifelong

Total Visits: 12 – One to two times per week with daily home stretching; strengthening 3x per week including PT