Shoulder pain: should I have arthroscopic surgery?

Is this decision aid relevant for me?

- This decision aid can help if you have shoulder pain due to common causes like rotator cuff tears or bursitis and are considering arthroscopic surgery of the shoulder.

Cause and symptoms of shoulder pain

- **Shoulder pain** is commonly caused by rotator cuff tears, swelling of fluid filled sacs call bursa (‘bursitis’) or impingement.
- Impingement occurs due to contact between a bony part of the shoulder (the ‘acromion’) and the rotator cuff tendons or bursa (see picture). Contact usually occurs as you move your arm out to the side.
- Shoulder pain often makes it difficult to do simple everyday tasks like reaching into a high cupboard and washing hair.
- Symptoms often take time to settle and one half of patients are better by around 6 months.

What are the treatment options covered in this decision aid?

1. **Surgery (‘subacromial decompression’ and/or ‘rotator cuff repair’)**

   Surgery requires admission to hospital and an anaesthetic. The surgeon will make a small skin cut in your shoulder to perform the procedure. Your surgeon may perform one or both of the following procedures:
   - **Subacromial decompression**: Increase the space under the acromion by either shaving back some bone, trimming some ligament or removing a bursa.
   - **Rotator cuff repair**: Reconnecting torn rotator cuff tendons.

   The surgeon may only decide on which procedure to perform while in surgery.

2. **No surgery**

   You can choose to not have surgery and instead have injections, physiotherapy, medication or wait to see if it improves by itself.

**Disclaimer:** Arthritis Australia provided funding to develop this tool but had no involvement in the development process. The developers of this decision aid include orthopaedic surgeons, rheumatologists, physiotherapists, psychologists and occupational therapists. 8/11 developers have a PhD. None of these people will gain or lose anything based on the choices that people make.
**What are the likely benefits of arthroscopic surgery and non-surgical options?**

**Subacromial decompression vs. placebo**

**HIGH CERTAINTY EVIDENCE** that subacromial decompression is little-to-no better than placebo...

*We are very confident that the figures below represent the true benefits of surgery*

Placebo = the patient goes under anaesthetic and the surgeon inserts the surgical tools BUT no further procedure is performed

- **Pain**
  - With decompression: 69
  - Placebo decompression: 71.8

- **Function**
  - With decompression: 29
  - Placebo decompression: 26.4

**KEY MESSAGE:** On average, surgery leads to 2.6% less pain and 2.8% better function compared to placebo surgery at 12 months.

Most patients would not consider these benefits important.

**Rotator cuff repair vs. no surgery**

**LOW-MODERATE CERTAINTY EVIDENCE** that rotator cuff repair is little-to-no better than no surgery...

*We have low-moderate confidence that the figures below represent the true benefits of surgery*

No surgery = injections, physiotherapy, medication or no treatment

- **Pain**
  - Rotator cuff repair: 16
  - No surgery: 73

- **Function**
  - Rotator cuff repair: 72
  - No surgery: 78

**KEY MESSAGE:** On average, surgery leads to 8.7% less pain and 6% better function compared to no surgery at 12 months.

Most patients would not consider these benefits important.

**What % of people report treatment success?**

- **Surgery**
  - Treatment success rated by patients: 95 out of 100 report success
  - Treatment not a success: 87 out of 100 report success

- **Placebo**
  - Treatment success rated by patients: 71 out of 100 report success
  - Treatment not a success: 66 out of 100 report success

With surgery, **5 more people out of 100** will report their treatment as successful at 12 months.

**With surgery, 8 more people out of 100** will report their treatment as successful at 12 months.
Are there other things I can do?

- Strength and endurance exercises for your shoulder might help reduce pain and improve function.
- Modifying your activities and using pain relieving medicines when needed might help reduce pain.
- Seek advice from a health professional about the options that best suit your needs.
- Consider surgery at a later point if the above points do not help.

Do I need arthroscopic surgery?

- Do I need arthroscopic surgery?
- What happens if I don’t have arthroscopic surgery?
- Do I know enough about the benefits and harms of:  
  » having arthroscopic surgery of the shoulder?  
  » not having arthroscopic surgery?
- Am I clear about which benefits and harms matter most to me?
- Do I have enough information and support to decide?