

Straight from the Shoulder

A Look at Arthroscopic Rotator Cuff Repair

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Aron Sele, pitcher for the Anaheim Angels, left the 2002 season early complaining of soreness in his right shoulder. It was later determined that the cause of this pain was a tear in his rotator cuff.

Following arthroscopic surgery, he returned to the Angels and had a successful 2003 season. In addition to athletes such as pitchers, swimmers, and tennis players, workers who perform overhead activities, including painting, stocking shelves, and construction, are prone to tears in their rotator cuffs.

A tear in the shoulder's rotator cuff, whether it is partial or full thickness, can occur because of a sudden injury (e.g., a fall or sudden jerklike lifting) or develop slowly from joint overuse. Most rotator cuff tears occur in the supraspinatus at the tendon's insertion site just posterior to the biceps tendon (the "critical zone").

This junction has a relatively poor blood supply, making the rotator cuff tendons especially vulnerable to degeneration with aging. This may explain why rotator cuff tears are fairly common after the fifth decade.

Diagnosing a rotator cuff problem requires a thorough review of the patient's symptoms, a physical examination, x-rays, and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI). It is more common in our practice to see patients over the age of 40 years with gradually worsening symptoms due to rotator cuff damage. Although their complaints may include shoulder weakness and pain, many patients with known rotator cuff tears have surprisingly few symptoms.

Without Warning

When the tear occurs with an injury, there is often sudden acute pain, a snapping sensation, and an immediate weakness of the arm. The patient may feel radiating pain down the side of the arm that persists even when the patient is not engaged in any lifting or reaching activities. Other symptoms may include stiffness and loss of motion. Patients may also complain of difficulty sleeping due to pain, especially when they lie on the affected shoulder.

As the disease progresses, discomfort and stiffness increase. Sometimes a catching sensation is felt when the arm is lowered. Weakness and inability to raise the arm, as well as severe night pain, may indicate a rotator cuff tear.

