Pain Insights

Courtesy of Joe De Santi, M.D.

SHOULDER PAIN

Shoulder pain is one of the most common types of joint pain and can occur for several reasons. The shoulder is capable of an extraordinary range of motion, but with this comes an amazing degree of susceptibility to injury. The head of the humerus sits in a socket that is essentially made up of cartilage and is surrounded by powerful muscles, their tendons and a capsule to hold it in place. The surrounding shoulder blade in the back and the collar bone in the front, provide additional stability through the ligamentous structures and attachments for the various muscular tendons.

Many common injuries occur due to a fall with the arm extended forward, backward, above the head or against the body. Direct downward forces to the top of the shoulder can also result in injury. Depending upon the mechanism of injury the ligamentous structures can be torn or stretched and the bones crushed, broken or dislocated from the joint. While the shoulder itself is capable on an incredible degree of motion, so are the sternoclavicular and acromioclavicular joints made by the breast bone with the collar bone and the collar bone with the shoulder blade respectively. A separated shoulder, commonly seen following a direct fall to the side of the upper arm, usually injures the joint between the collar bone and the shoulder blade and results in pain and deformity to the anterior aspect of the shoulder. This is commonly seen in football players when tackled holding a ball close to the body.

Dislocations are also possible when the head of the humerus or upper arm pops out of the cartilaginous socket and moves forward, backward, upward or downward. Depending upon the mechanism of injury the direction can usually be predicted. Dislocations of the shoulder can be one of the most painful injuries to sustain and usually require a fair degree of sedation and muscle relaxation to correct. This is often done in the emergency room.

More commonly the shoulder develops pain from overuse of the muscles and the wear and tear on the tendons or bursa. A frozen shoulder is actually not frozen but it does become significantly restricted in its movement. This is caused by a chronic inflammation that scars the tissues around the head of the humerus and makes it very difficult, if not impossible, to raise the arm above the head or to rotate the arm at the shoulder. As we age there will be some inevitable changes in these tissues but keeping the muscles strong is a plus.