Intermountain® Healthcare

Shoulder Arthroscopy: *Recovering at Home*

Your surgery and recovery

Shoulder arthroscopy is a surgery to examine or repair tissues in or around your shoulder. Because it is done with very small incisions, recovery is faster than with open surgery. Still, though, your body will need time to recover. For most people, this takes between 1 and 6 months, depending on what repairs were done.

There's a lot you can do to make your recovery go better and help your shoulder heal faster. Following the instructions on this fact sheet will help.

Managing pain

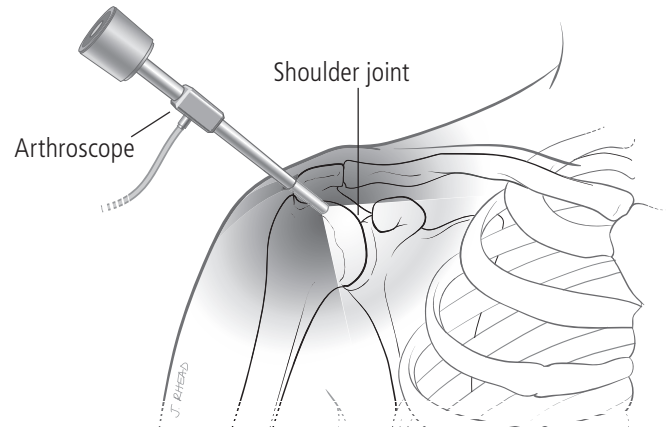
Managing your pain well is important. In addition to making you more comfortable, having less pain will allow you to do the exercises you need to do to recover. Here are some ways to manage pain:

- **Medication.** Your doctor will recommend a pain medication for you. **Be sure to take it right on schedule at first.** It's easier to control the pain before it gets too bad. Your pain should decrease after the first few days. If it doesn't, be sure to tell your doctor.
- **Cold therapy,** if your doctor recommends it. You may be instructed to put a cold pack over your wound several times a day. This can help decrease pain and swelling. Do not apply heat.

Caring for your incisions

Keeping your incisions clean and free of infection will help you heal faster and prevent complications.

- **Protect your incisions.** You will have a thick dressing on your shoulder. Leave it in place until your healthcare providers say you can remove it. This may be a few days after surgery.



The surgeon inserts an arthroscope through a small incision and examines the tissues inside. Through other small incisions, other tools are used to make repairs.

- **Keep your incisions dry.** For the first few days, you'll need to take a sponge bath. You may not shower until after your dressing is removed. You may not take a bath until your wounds are healed, usually about 2 to 3 weeks after surgery.

  Fluid may leak from you incisions. This is fluid that was used in your shoulder to help with the procedure, and is not a problem. If your dressing gets very wet, though, ask your healthcare providers if it should be replaced, or if you should place another dressing over the first one.
- Your sutures (stitches) will be removed about 7 to 10 days after your surgery.

What to eat

- **On the day of your surgery** you may not want to eat anything heavy for several hours.
- **Eat healthy foods.** You can return to your normal diet as soon as you feel like it. Try to eat a healthy, well-balanced diet. Good nutrition will help you feel better and heal faster.

What will rehabilitation involve?

Your healthcare providers will give you detailed information about your recovery and rehabilitation exercises. In general, there are 4 goals to recovery and rehabilitation. These are:

1. **Allow your shoulder to heal.** This means keeping your shoulder stable and protecting it from injury. If you are given a sling, be sure to wear it as long as your healthcare providers recommend.
2. **Regain your range motion.** You'll need to do specific exercises to help increase the range of motion in your shoulder. Your doctor may recommend that you work with a physical therapist. You will also need to do exercises at home. Doing your exercises as prescribed is very important to your recovery.
3. **Rebuild your strength.** You will also need to do exercises to help build strength in your shoulder. Again, your doctor may recommend that you work with a physical therapist, and you will also need to do exercises at home. Doing your exercises as prescribed is very important to your recovery.
4. **Return to activities at the right time.** How soon you can return to various activities depends on how much you'll need to use your operated arm. If you go back too soon, you risk injuring it again.
   - You can return to **light activities,** such as school or work that's not physical, fairly soon. Many people can go back after about a week.
   - **Heavier physical activities,** such as sports or more physical work will take longer. Even if your arm feels fine, it may not be safe yet. For many people, it can take 2 to 6 months after surgery. Be **sure** to check with your doctor before returning.

How can I prevent problems in the future?

The most important thing you can do is try to keep your shoulder strong and flexible. Try to stay active. Ask your healthcare providers to recommend exercises you can continue to do, and follow their instructions carefully.

Follow-up visit

Your surgeon will need to check on your recovery. Stitches or staples may also be removed at this time. Ask your surgeon how soon this should be. Schedule the appointment before you leave the hospital or as soon as you get home, and be sure to keep it.

When should I call my doctor?

After surgery, some pain, tenderness and stiffness are normal. If you have the following symptoms, however, be sure to call your doctor:

- Fever over 101° F after the second day following surgery
- Increasing pain or swelling
- Redness, warmth, or tenderness
- Numbness or tingling in the arm or hand

For information about preparing for shoulder surgery, ask for the Intermountain fact sheet: *Shoulder Arthroscopy: Preparing for Surgery.*

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