About Shoulder Impingement

Shoulder Anatomy

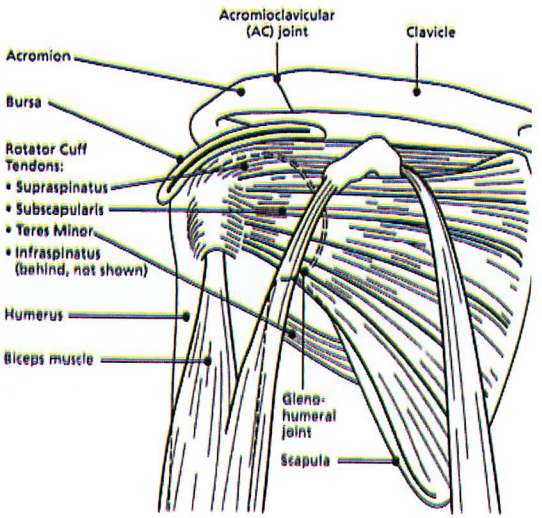
3 bones make up the shoulder:

- scapula (shoulder blade)
- humerus (upper arm bone)
- clavicle (collarbone)

The rotator cuff connects the humerus to the scapula. It helps to raise and rotate the arm.

As the arm is raised, the rotator cuff also keeps the humerus tightly in the socket of the scapula, the glenoid. The upper part of the scapula that makes up the roof of the shoulder is called the acromion.

A bursa is located between the acromion and the rotator cuff tendons, and functions to decrease friction. In this case, the bursa protects the acromion and the rotator cuff from grinding against each other.



What is Impingement?

Shoulder impingement occurs when there is a rubbing or pinching of the rotator cuff tendons and/or bursa under the acromion.

What Causes Impingement?

Every day activities that involve raising your arm above shoulder level cause some extent of impingement. Continuous overhead activity or other repetitive shoulder actions such as repeated throwing can cause impingement to become a problem.

Symptoms

Common symptoms of shoulder impingement include the following:

- General ache in the front of the shoulder and/or side of the arm
- Pain when raising arm in front of body (flexion)
- Pain when raising arm out to side (abduction)
- Sharp pain with activities that place the arm behind the back, such as trying to reach into back pocket
- "Catching" sensation when trying to lower arm from elevated position

How Physical Therapy Can Help

Physical Therapy can help patients with shoulder impingement in a number of ways.

- Modalities (heat/ice, electric stimulation, ultrasound) to decrease pain/inflammation and promote healing
- Therapeutic exercises to strengthen rotator cuff muscles and stabilizers of the scapula
- Manual techniques to improve shoulder range of motion (ROM)
- Personalized home exercise program to maintain strength/flexibility outside of therapy
- Education on body mechanics, technique modifications to prevent future recurrence

With physical therapy, many patients gain relief from their impingement symptoms and are able to return to full activity with improved strength and flexibility.