Understanding rotator cuff-related shoulder pain

A balanced guide to assessment, rehabilitation and when imaging may help.

Common symptoms

Pain with reaching, lifting or sleeping on the shoulder can arise from several conditions. The symptom pattern alone does not identify the exact structure causing pain.

A new traumatic inability to raise the arm, major weakness or fever requires prompt assessment.

What usually helps

The 2025 clinical practice guideline supports personalised information and active rehabilitation as first-line treatment for rotator cuff tendinopathy.

Hands-on techniques can sometimes reduce pain in the short term, but should support rather than replace rehabilitation and activity planning.

When ultrasound may be useful

Ultrasound may help with suspected tendon disruption, calcific deposits or other findings when the result will influence management. It is not necessary for every shoulder pain presentation.

Discuss with your physiotherapist

What movements matter most to you? How will progress be measured? What loading approach is suitable? Is scanning likely to change your treatment?

Research sources

Desmeules, F. *et al.* (2025) 'Rotator cuff tendinopathy diagnosis, nonsurgical medical care, and rehabilitation: A clinical practice guideline', *Journal of Orthopaedic & Sports Physical Therapy*, 55(4), pp. 235–274. doi:10.2519/jospt.2025.13182. https://doi.org/10.2519/jospt.2025.13182

General information only. Seek clinical advice for new or urgent symptoms.