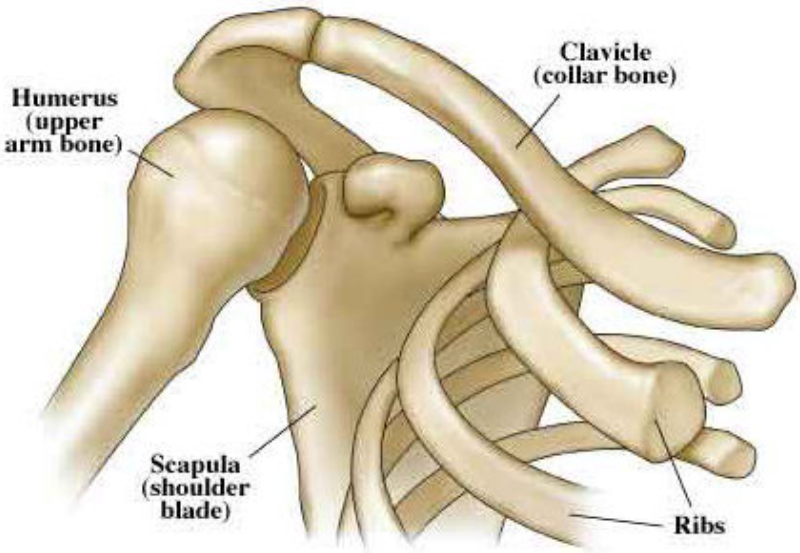
Shoulder Sprain

A shoulder sprain is the result of damage to the tough, fiber-like tissues (*ligaments*) that help hold your shoulder in place. The ligaments could be stretched or torn. Besides the main shoulder joint (the ball and socket), there are several smaller joints that connect the bones in this area. A sprain usually involves one of those joints. Most often it is the acromioclavicular (or AC) joint. That is the joint that connects the collarbone (*clavicle*) and the shoulder blade (*scapula*) at the top point of the shoulder blade (*acromion*).



© SEIF & ASSOCIATES, INC., 2004

A shoulder sprain is a mild form of what is called a shoulder separation. Recovering from a shoulder sprain may take some time. For some, pain lingers for several months. Most people recover without long term problems.

CAUSES

- A shoulder sprain is usually caused by some kind of trauma. This might be:
  - Falling on an outstretched arm.
  - Being hit hard on the shoulder.
  - Twisting the arm.
- Shoulder sprains are more likely to occur to people who:
  - Play sports.
  - Have balance or coordination problems.

SYMPTOMS

- Pain when you move your shoulder.
- Limited ability to move the shoulder.
- Swelling and tenderness on top of the shoulder.
- Redness or warmth in the shoulder.
- Bruising.
- A change in the shape of the shoulder.

DIAGNOSIS

Your healthcare provider will probably:

- Ask about your symptoms.
- Ask about recent activity that might have caused those symptoms.
- Examine your shoulder. You may be asked to do simple exercises to test movement. The other shoulder will be examined for comparison.
- Order some tests that provide a look inside the body. They can show the extent of the injury. The tests could include:
  - X-rays.
  - CT (*Computed tomography*) scan.
  - MRI (*Magnetic resonance imaging*) scan.

TREATMENT

How long it takes to recover from a shoulder sprain depends on how severe it was. Treatment options may

include:

- Rest. You should not use the arm and shoulder until it heals.
- Ice. For two or three days after the injury, put an ice pack on the shoulder up to four times a day. It should stay on for 15 to 20 minutes each time. Wrap the ice in a towel so it does not touch your skin.
- Over-the-counter medicine to relieve pain.
- A sling or brace. This will keep the arm still while the shoulder is healing.
- Physical therapy or rehabilitation exercises. These will help you regain strength and motion. Ask your healthcare provider when it is OK to begin these exercises.
- Surgery. The need for surgery is rare with a sprained shoulder. Some people, though, need surgery to keep the joint in place and reduce pain.

POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

- Loss of full shoulder motion.
- Ongoing shoulder pain.

HOME CARE INSTRUCTIONS

- Ask your healthcare provider about what you should and should not do while your shoulder heals.
- Make sure you know how to apply ice to the correct area of your shoulder.
- Talk with your healthcare provider about which medications for pain and swelling should be used.
- If rehabilitation therapy will be needed, ask your healthcare provider to refer you to a therapist. If it is not recommended, then ask about at-home exercises. Find out when exercise should begin.

SEEK MEDICAL CARE IF:

- You develop a fever above 101.5°F (38.6°C).
- Pain, swelling or redness at the joint increases.

SEEK IMMEDIATE MEDICAL CARE IF:

- You develop a fever above 102.0°F (38.9°C).
- You cannot move your arm or shoulder.

Document Released: 05/06/2010
ExitCare® Patient Information ©2011 ExitCare, LLC.