

## Physical Therapy Exercises & Stretches for Chronic Shoulder Pain

Chronic shoulder pain is the most common upper extremity pain. While we typically refer to this type of pain as “impingement”, there’s no actual evidence of anything being pinched. The most commonly affected tissues are believed to be the rotator cuff tendons being inflamed or degenerative. However, many patients also have non-specific anterior shoulder pain across the entire front of the shoulder joint capsule and associated tendons.

There are two key points that must be emphasized for every patient with shoulder pain like this:

First, the pain is most often felt in the front or side of the shoulder but addressing the pain is most effectively done by strengthening the midscapular muscles between your shoulder blades. These muscles are critical for pulling your shoulder blades “together” which directly decreases the tension through the anterior shoulder joint capsule and rotator cuff tendons.

Second, the rotator cuff tendons are very thin and broad and do not have as good of blood flow as other tendons, like your Achilles or Patellar tendons. So when we exercise the shoulder we recommend doing higher repetitions of the strengthening exercises to increase how much blood flow is pumped through those flat, thin tendons.

1. **Rotator cuff muscle (and tendon) strengthening is a must!** The best research on chronic shoulder pain, shoulder impingement, rotator cuff tendonitis, or bursitis all supports strengthening. The rotator cuff muscles and tendons are important for stabilizing the shoulder joint and for stabilizing the joint as you move your arms. In older age, tearing them is relatively common. Strengthening can help prevent that!
2. **Upper back strengthening is a must.** The midscapular muscles between our shoulder blades tend to be almost everyone’s “weak link”. Watch someone deadlift - even very strong lifters tend to round out their upper backs. Always emphasize squeezing your shoulder blades together.
3. **Posture is somewhat important.** There’s no great research on the importance of posture, but when it comes to bench press and pushups, people with shoulder pain tend to get immediate relief when they squeeze their shoulder blades together while performing those exercises. Throughout the day, work on maintaining a good neutral posture, especially if you’re using your arms to work overhead or have a physically demanding job.

Use bands or cables to strengthen these muscles 2-3 times per week.



# Beginner Strength Circuit for Shoulder Pain

## SET YOUR SHOULDER BLADES!

Before doing any upper body or shoulder exercise, \*set\* your shoulder blades by squeezing them “in” and “down”

Think of pinching a pencil between your shoulder blades and not dropping it throughout the entire set of exercise.



## Exercise #1 - Bilateral External Rotations

Goal: Do 3 sets of 15-25 reps (in a controlled speed)



## Exercise #2 - Scaption

Goal: Do 3 sets of 15-25 reps (in a controlled speed)



## #3 Recovery Stretch—Doorway Lat/Shoulder Stretch

Goal: 30-45 sec on each side



## Exercise #4 - Rows

Goal: Do 3 sets of 15-25 reps (in a controlled speed)



# Progressing the Strengthening Exercises for Shoulder Pain

**Bilateral External Rotations @ 45 degrees of abduction (Left) and ~80-90 degrees of abduction (right)**

**Goal:** Do 3 sets of 12-20 reps (in a controlled speed)



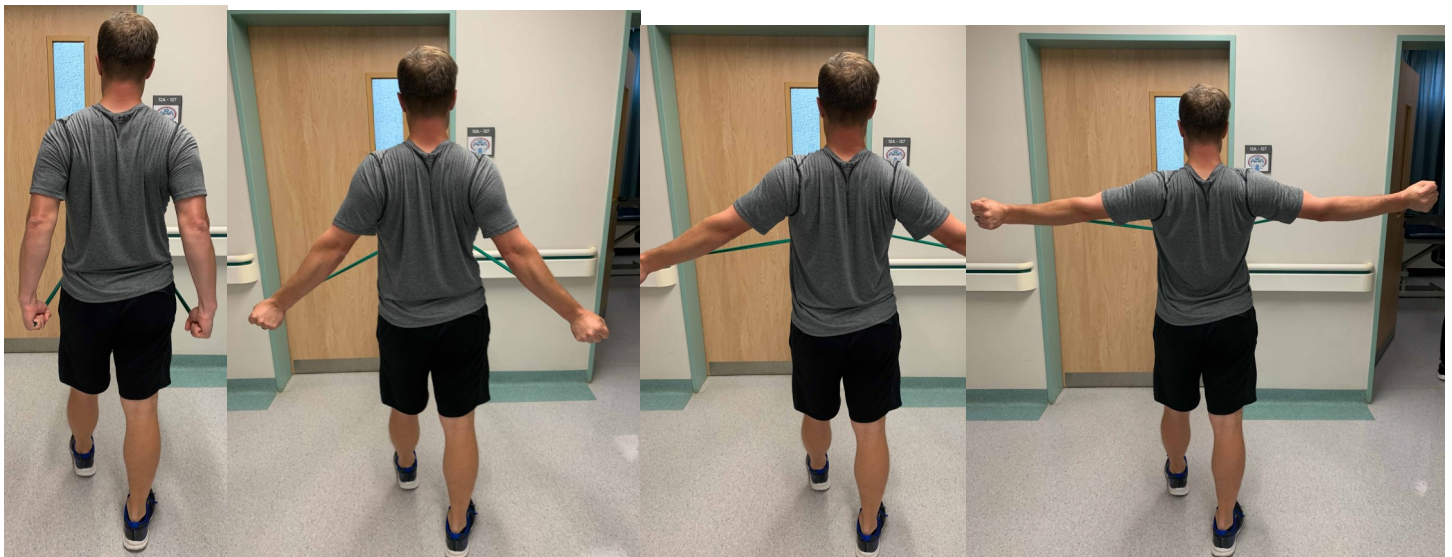
**Standing Rows @ 45 degrees of abduction (Left) and ~80-90 degrees of abduction (right)**

**Goal:** Do 3 sets of 12-20 reps (in a controlled speed)



**Standing I's to T's**

**Goal:** Do 2-3 sets of 3-5 reps in each direction (it's difficult, but keep the shoulder blades squeezed together!)



# Recovery Stretches—do 5-10 min of stretching before & after exercise

Pick 3-5 stretches and do them every day after you get home or when your pain increases. Hold the stretch for 20-30 seconds and slowly push yourself further.

