

Rotator Cuff Patient Guide

---

# Your complete guide to recovery after rotator cuff surgery.



---

## A smoother recovery takes the right steps and support.

Rotator cuff surgery has a reputation for being a long, tough process. And while it takes time, knowing what to expect and following the right plan can help get rid of your shoulder pain for good and get back to the activities you've been missing.

This guide will help you prepare for surgery and stay on track throughout your recovery. And if you need answers or support, your AHN orthopaedic and therapy teams are here for you every step of the way.

### First, here's a quick overview of your procedure:

- During surgery, your surgeon will repair damage to your shoulder tendons and anchor them back to your arm.
- Next, your surgeon will check and fix any other structures needed to give you the best chance to fully recover.
- After surgery, you, your surgeon, and your physical therapist will talk through exactly what was done and make a rehab plan tailored to you and your needs.

Remember, every rotator cuff repair is different. And that means every rotator cuff rehab is different. Don't compare your injury and recovery to someone else who's had rotator cuff surgery. Stick to your plan and always ask if you have questions.

**Speaking of questions, turn the page for some of the most common ones about rotator cuff surgery.**





---

## Frequently asked questions about rotator cuff recovery.

### How much pain can I expect? How will it be managed?

Pain levels vary, but we treat it in a few different ways. First, we'll numb your shoulder during surgery to limit any initial pain. Then, you'll have narcotic medication for any heavy pain after surgery. You'll also use an ice pack during the first two weeks to reduce inflammation. And later, your physical therapist (PT) will use certain treatments in the clinic to help you deal with any lingering pain and soreness.

### Is it normal to have bruising and swelling?

**Yes.** There's almost always some bruising or swelling after surgery. How much depends on the surgery. And sometimes gravity moves that bruising or swelling down into your arm, but that's normal too.

### Will I have any other soreness?

**You might.** Some people have soreness in the top of their shoulder and the side of their neck from the sling or a change in posture. If it happens to you, let your PT know. They'll give you tips and treatments to get relief.

### Will I wear the sling all the time?

**For the most part, yes.** You can expect to wear a sling for the 6 weeks after surgery. Initially, you'll be sleeping with it on too. And you'll ALWAYS wear it outside your home. Not just to protect your shoulder, but as a visual warning for others. Once you're ready, your PT will work with you on a schedule to start wearing it less and less.

### What if my initial bandage looks discolored or I can see blood on it?

**Don't worry, that's normal.** If it happens, tell your surgeon's office and they'll give you instructions on how to change or reinforce it.



---

## Frequently asked questions about rotator cuff recovery.

### When does my initial bandage come off?

**Typically, 1-2 weeks after surgery.** At your first post-op follow-up with your surgeon, we'll change your bandage, remove stitches, and apply Steri-Strips to keep the incisions closed while they heal. Don't use any topical antiseptics or ointments until after the Steri-Strips come off, which will happen naturally in about a week.

### When can I shower?

**As soon as your stitches are out.** But until the Steri-Strips wear off in about a week, you shouldn't scrub the incision area. If you're in the tub, don't put the incisions under water before they're fully healed.

### Is it possible to reinjure my rotator cuff during recovery?

**Unfortunately, yes.** The surgery uses sutures or anchors to hold your tendon in place until your body heals — which can take up to 12 weeks. To prevent a reinjury, don't reach your recovering arm away from your body or rest any body weight on that hand, elbow, or shoulder.

### When will I be able to drive?

**Not until at least 6 weeks after surgery.** That's the time when you're in your sling. Keep this in mind because you'll need to arrange for rides to and from doctor and PT appointments. Your surgeon will let you know exactly when it's safe to drive.

### When can I return to work?

**Check with your surgeon.** Depending on the job, time off can range anywhere from a week for light duty work to a few months for heavy labor. You and your surgeon will make the decision to return together. Because you know best what your job takes day to day and your surgeon knows best about your repair and the healing process.

### When can I return to school?

**Usually, a week after surgery.** But ALWAYS wear your sling throughout the school day and follow the rest of the rules for not using your arm while it recovers.



---

## What to expect during your rehab.

Your rehab will consist of three phases and two main types of treatment. Your surgeon will track your progress and be your guide throughout, but how quickly and successfully your recovery goes depends mainly on how well you stick to your plan.

### Rehab phases

#### Phase 1: Protection

For the first few weeks after surgery, protecting your shoulder will be your top priority while the healing process begins. You'll be adjusting. Take it slow. Ask for help.

#### Phase 2: Mobility

When your surgeon decides you're ready, your rehab team will help you regain your range of motion. You'll start to see progress, but listen to your team and your body.

#### Phase 3: Function

During the last phase, you'll start rebuilding the strength in your repaired shoulder. You'll have better range of motion here, but don't overdo it. Stick with your program.

### Treatment types

#### Physical Therapy (PT)

Count on having at least 8 to 10 weeks of formal, in-person PT. Based on what your surgeon thinks is best, you'll start PT appointments 1 to 6 weeks after surgery. Once you start, your therapist will schedule 1 to 3 sessions per week based on your individual needs and the best use of your insurance benefits.

#### Home Exercise Program

When you're not doing PT, you'll have some homework to do. Every day. Just like your doctor and PT appointments, doing your prescribed daily home exercise program is vital to your recovery. Once formal PT visits end, you'll get additional instructions for the rest of your home exercise program.

As you go through rehab, you may not see big changes every day. But remember, slow progress is still progress. Whatever phase you're in, stick with your plan. And the best way to stick with it? Prepare for your life after surgery, before surgery.

**Next, we'll give you a list of prep items to make things easier.**





---

## A checklist to prep now, before your surgery.

Your surgery may be days or even weeks away, but there's plenty you can do right now to set yourself up for success and make the road to recovery easier.

### Everyday items

Go through your daily routine. Move household objects you use regularly – plates, glasses, your toothbrush, etc. – to areas that are easily accessible. Waist level is best.

### Transportation

You can't drive after surgery, but you'll still need a way to get to and from follow-up visits and PT sessions. Set up rides or find someone who's available to drive you.

### Clothes

Pull out comfy items that are easy to put on and take off. Think button-downs and slip-on shoes. Consider getting a dressing stick from an online retailer or a medical supply site.

### Furniture

Reclining furniture is ideal for sitting and sleeping during recovery. It makes it hard for you to roll on your side, which could hurt your shoulder. If you don't have any reclining furniture, consider borrowing or renting an easy chair. If that's not an option, have extra pillows to help keep you in a safe position on your sofa or in bed.

### Schedule

Avoid having other elective procedures immediately after your rotator cuff surgery. You should also avoid booking vacations. You'll enjoy a vacation a whole lot more once you're feeling like yourself again.

### Work and school

Let your employer or your teachers know about your surgery and rehab. You can use the information in this guide to let them know what to expect in the weeks after the procedure.

**Once you've taken care of these, take a look at the next page for some tips on doing day-to-day activities while you can't move one of your arms.**





---

## How to do simple daily tasks with one arm.

If you have family and friends who offer to help, take them up on it. When your recovery's complete, you can give them a hand in return. Or just a pain-free high five. Whether you have that help or not, review these tips on doing day-to-day tasks on your own – while still protecting your shoulder.

### Getting a good night's sleep

Sleep in a reclined position. Never lie flat on your back. You could hurt your healing shoulder. If you have a recliner, use that as your bed. If you don't, prop your upper body up on pillows at a 45-degree angle with pillows on either side of you to prevent rolling onto your side.



Sleep in a recliner.



Sleep propped up with pillows at a 45-degree angle.

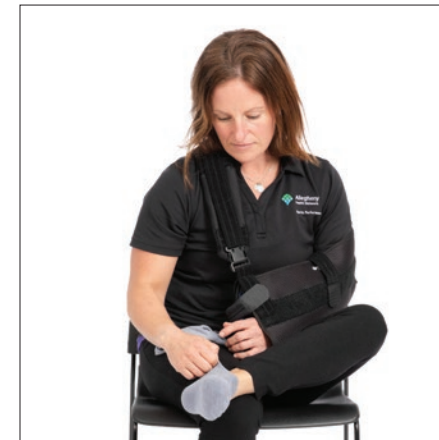
### Putting on socks



**Step 1.** Cross one leg over your knee.



**Step 2.** Use your strong hand to spread open the sock. Place the sock over your foot.



**Step 3.** Slowly work the sock up your foot.



**Step 4.** Repeat for the other foot.

## Putting on deodorant



**Step 1.** If you're able, use your affected hand to hold the deodorant.



**Step 2.** Remove the cap with your strong hand.



**Step 3.** Lean forward and let your affected arm dangle, then apply the deodorant with your strong hand.



**Step 4.** Use your strong hand to apply the deodorant to your strong arm.

## Brushing your teeth



**Step 1.** Use your affected hand to stabilize the toothbrush.



**Step 2.** Unscrew the cap of the toothpaste with your strong hand.



**Step 3.** Continue using your strong hand to apply toothpaste to the brush.



**Step 4.** Use your strong hand to brush your teeth.



## Putting on pants with a zipper



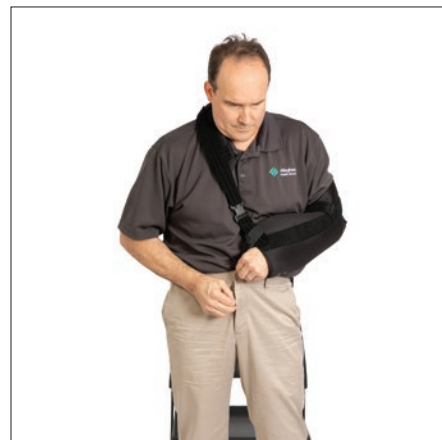
**Step 1.** Cross the leg of your affected side over your knee. Use your strong hand to pull the pants over the foot of your leg on the affected side.



**Step 2.** Place your strong foot into the pants. If you're able, you can stabilize the pants with your affected hand.

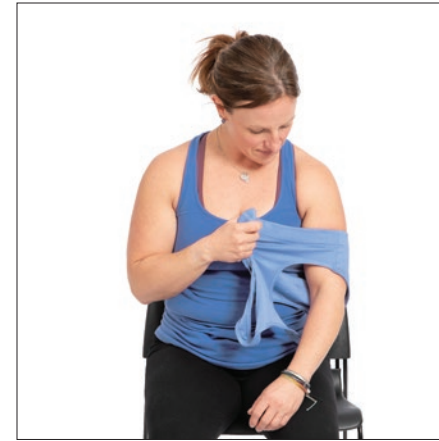


**Step 3.** Bring the pants up over both knees to prevent them from falling when you stand.



**Step 4.** Stand and pull up the pants. Use your affected hand to stabilize the pants, and zip up the pants with your strong hand while holding the lower end of the zipper taut.

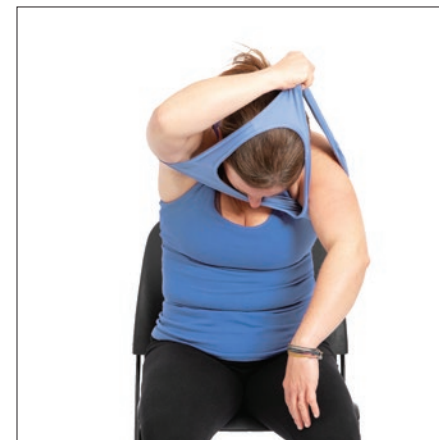
## Putting on a pullover bra



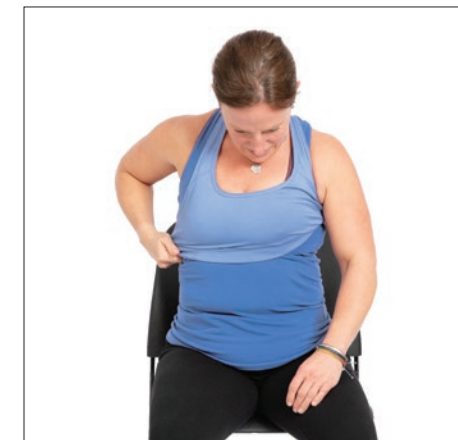
**Step 1.** Use your strong hand to pull the bra over your affected hand and up past the elbow.



**Step 2.** Slide your strong arm into the arm hole on the other side.



**Step 3.** Use your strong arm to grab the back of the bra and pull it over your head.



**Step 4.** Adjust the bra by pulling it down until it's comfortable.

## Putting on a shirt with a dressing stick



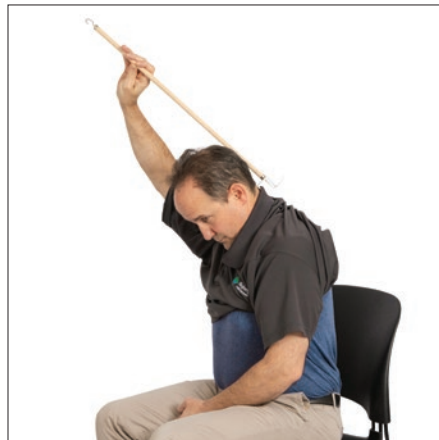
**Step 1.** Sit with your shirt and the dressing stick in your lap.



**Step 2.** Gather the opening of the shirtsleeve on your affected arm and begin working the arm through the sleeve.



**Step 3.** Pull the shirt up your arm and over your elbow, then slide your strong arm into the other sleeve.



**Step 4.** Position the hook of the dressing stick on the back of the collar. Use your strong arm to push the shirt up and over your head.





Allegheny Health Network (AHN) complies with applicable Federal civil rights laws and does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, age, disability or sex in its health programs and services. In order to treat individuals in a nondiscriminatory manner, AHN provides free communication aids and language assistance services.

ATTENTION: If you speak English, language assistance services, free of charge, are available to you. (412) 469-5017

ATENCIÓN: si habla español, tiene a su disposición servicios gratuitos de asistencia lingüística. Llame al (412) 469-5017

注意：如果您使用繁體中文，您可以免費獲得語言援助服務。請致電 (412) 469-5017