Symptoms of Frozen Shoulder

Frozen shoulder causes pain and stiffness that develop gradually. Common symptoms include:

- **Pain in the shoulder** – often worse at night and when lying on that side. About 30% of people feel the pain in both shoulders.
- **Stiffness** – hard to lift your arm overhead or reach behind your back.
- **Limited movement** – both self-movement and when someone else tries to move your arm.
- **Difficulty with daily tasks** – dressing, combing hair, reaching shelves.

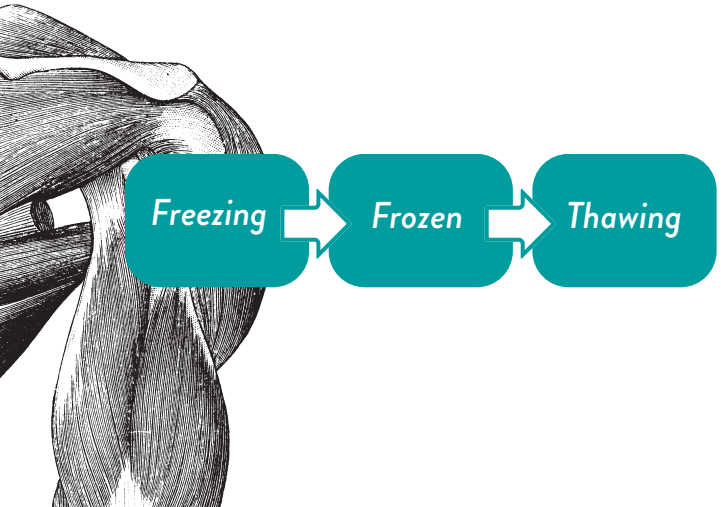
[1,2]

Stages of Frozen Shoulder

Frozen shoulder usually progresses through three stages. Knowing them helps you understand what to expect:

- **Freezing stage** – Pain develops and slowly worsens; stiffness begins.
- **Frozen stage** – Pain may lessen, but shoulder is very stiff; movement is most limited. Can last for 3-9 months.
- **Thawing stage** – Pain eases and movement gradually returns over months.

Recovery can take 1–3 years, but most people regain good or full shoulder function.



When to Seek Help

Visit a doctor or physiotherapist if:

- ***Pain is severe or worsening despite home care.***
- ***You cannot move your shoulder enough to do daily tasks.***
- ***Night pain is disturbing your sleep regularly.***
- ***Your shoulder remains stiff for more than 2–3 months without improvement.***
- ***You have other medical conditions (like diabetes or thyroid disease) and develop shoulder stiffness.***

Frequently Asked Questions

QUESTION	ANSWER
Is it the same as arthritis?	*No. Frozen shoulder affects the joint capsule, not the bones or cartilage.*
Will it come back?	*Usually not in the same shoulder. It can sometimes affect the other shoulder.*
Will it come back?	*Usually not in the same shoulder. It can sometimes affect the other shoulder.*

Frozen shoulder is common and treatable.
With patience, exercises, and the right care, you will improve.
Don't give up — recovery takes time, but you are not alone.

References

- American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons (AAOS). Frozen Shoulder (Adhesive Capsulitis). OrthoInfo, 2022.
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v1.0 - 09/25 | for any queries, edits or error reporting, contact amnwah003@myuct.ac.za

Do You Have Frozen Shoulder?

A SIMPLE GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING, MANAGING AND CONQUERING

Frozen shoulder (also called *adhesive capsulitis*) is a condition where the shoulder joint becomes:

- Painful (often worse at night)
- Very stiff (hard to lift or reach behind your back)
- Slow to recover (can last 1–3 years, but usually improves with treatment and time)

This pain and reduced movement is caused by swelling and scarring of the protective synovial membranes around the shoulder joint.

Learn More About Frozen Shoulder

Scan the QR code to access trusted, validated information from the Mayo Clinic.

FACULTY OF HEALTH SCIENCES

W. Amanjee, R. Peigou Wonkam

Why does Frozen Shoulder Develop? [2, 4, 5]

Frozen shoulder (*adhesive capsulitis*) happens when the capsule around your shoulder joint becomes inflamed, thickens, and tightens. This makes the joint stiff and painful to move.

Inflammation
Swelling inside the capsule makes the shoulder stiff.

Capsule Tightening
The tissue around the joint shrinks and loses elasticity.

Adhesions
Frozen shoulder happens when the joint capsule becomes inflamed, thickens, and tightens, making movement painful and restricted.

Risk Factors [REF]

Certain people are more likely to develop frozen shoulder.

Knowing these risk factors is important because it can help you:

- Recognise **symptoms** earlier
- Seek **treatment** sooner
- **Prevent stiffness** after injury or surgery

This can guide both patients and healthcare teams in protecting shoulder health.

Age
Most common between **40–60 years** old.

Sex
Women are more frequently affected.

Diabetes
Up to 20% of people with diabetes may develop frozen shoulder.

Shoulder Injury or Surgery
Long periods of immobility after injury or an operation can trigger stiffness.

Other Health Conditions
Stroke, Parkinsons, Thyroid disease and some heart/lung surgeries can raise risk.

Myths & Facts [REF]

MYTHS	FACTS
Frozen shoulder means your bones are damaged.	False! Bones and cartilage are usually normal. The capsule is the problem.
It ONLY happens to older people	False! Most cases are age 40–60, but it can happen earlier.
Resting completely will help it heal.	False! Not moving can make stiffness worse. Gentle movement can help.
Surgery is always needed	False! Most people recover with time, physio, and medication.
It never gets better.	False! It almost always improves within 1–3 years. Don't lose hope.

LIVING WITH FROZEN SHOULDER CAN BE FRUSTRATING AND PAINFUL, BUT REMEMBER, RECOVERY IS POSSIBLE.

👉 *FOR ASSISTANCE AND TREATMENT, CONTACT YOUR NEAREST HEALTHCARE FACILITY AND SPEAK TO YOUR GENERAL PRACTITIONER FOR A POSSIBLE REFERRAL TO:*

GROOTE SCHUUR HOSPITAL – RHEUMATOLOGY CLINIC
TEL: 021 404 2131

The Freeze Fighters
TOGETHER AGAINST TIGHT SHOULDERS

Treatment Options [2,9]

Most people with frozen shoulder recover ***without surgery***. The main goal of treatment is to manage pain and restore movement. Your doctor or physiotherapist will guide you.

Early or Moderate Symptoms

Usually managed without Surgery

- **Pain relief**: Paracetamol or anti-inflammatory tablets (e.g. ibuprofen) help ease pain and swelling.
- **Heat or ice packs**: Apply before or after exercise for comfort.
- **Physiotherapy & exercises**: Gentle stretches and exercise are very important as treatment. Doing these daily can speed recovery.

Severe or Persistent Symptoms

Sometimes need Medical Procedures

- **Steroid injections**: Anti-inflammatory medicine injected into the joint may ease pain and stiffness for temporary relief.
- Non-steroidal anti-inflammatories (NSAIDs) - can be prescribed to assist in reducing the discomfort.
- **Advanced options** (rare): If symptoms do not improve after many months, procedures like manipulation under anaesthetic or arthroscopic surgery may be considered.

📌 **Important**: Always discuss your treatment plan with your healthcare provider. Surgery is only needed in rare cases. Don't delay seeking help as this can prolong your discomfort and slow down your recovery.

Lifestyle & Self-Care Tips

- **Keep moving (gently):** Do your stretches every day, even if movement is limited.
- **Use heat before exercise:** A warm shower or hot pack helps loosen the joint.
- **Cool down afterwards:** Ice packs can reduce pain after activity.
- **Don't force it:** Stretching should feel gentle, not sharp or unbearable.
- **Control pain:** Take prescribed or recommended medication so you can stay active.
- **Be patient:** Recovery is slow (months to years), but most people get full movement back.