

Osteoarthritis of the Acromioclavicular Joint

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Introduction

Some joints in the body are more likely to develop problems from normal wear and tear. Degeneration causes the cartilage that cushions the joint to wear out. This type of arthritis is called osteoarthritis. Doctors sometimes refer to this type of arthritis as arthrosis.

The acromioclavicular (AC) joint in the shoulder is a common spot for osteoarthritis to develop in middle age. Degeneration of the AC joint can be painful and can cause difficulty using the shoulder for everyday activities.

This guide will help you understand

- what the AC joint is and how it works
- the causes of pain and problems in the AC joint
- the treatments used for this condition

Anatomy

What exactly is the AC joint?

The shoulder is made up of three bones: the scapula (shoulder blade), the humerus (upper arm bone), and the clavicle (collarbone).

The part of the scapula that makes up the roof of the shoulder and connects with the clavicle is called the acromion. The joint where the acromion and the clavicle join is the AC joint.

In some ways, the AC joint is like any other joint. It has two bones that need to connect but be flexible as well. The ends of the bones are covered with articular cartilage. Articular cartilage provides a slick, rubbery surface that allows the bones to glide over each other as you move. Cartilage also functions as sort of a shock absorber.

However, the AC joint is different from joints like the knee or ankle, because it doesn't need to move very much. The AC joint only needs to be flexible enough for the shoulder to move freely. The AC joint just shifts a bit as the shoulder moves.

View
animation of shoulder movement

Related Document: [A Patient's Guide to Shoulder Anatomy](#)

Causes

Why does degeneration of the AC joint occur?

We use our shoulder constantly. The resulting strain makes AC joint osteoarthritis a common disorder. The AC joint is under constant stress as the arm is used overhead. Weightlifters and others who repeatedly lift heavy amounts of weight overhead tend to have an increased incidence of the condition, and often at a younger age.

AC joint osteoarthritis may also develop following an injury to the joint, such as an AC joint separation. This injury is fairly common. A separation usually results from falling on the shoulder. The shoulder does heal, but many years later degeneration causes the AC joint to become painful.

Related Document: [A Patient's Guide to Acromioclavicular Joint Separation](#)

Symptoms

What are the symptoms of this condition?

In its early stages, AC joint osteoarthritis usually causes pain and tenderness in the front of the shoulder around the joint. The pain is often worse when the arm is brought across the chest, since this motion compresses the joint. The pain is vague and may spread to include the shoulder, the front of the chest, and the neck. If the joint has been injured in the past, there may be a bigger bump over the joint on the

affected shoulder than on the unaffected shoulder. The joint may also click or snap as it moves.

Diagnosis

What tests will my doctor do?

Your doctor will want to get a detailed medical history, including questions about your condition and how it is affecting you. You will need to answer questions about past injuries to your shoulder. You may be asked to rate your pain on a scale of one to ten. Your doctor will also want to know how much your pain affects your daily tasks.

Diagnosis of AC joint osteoarthritis is usually made by physical examination. The AC joint is usually tender. A key finding is pain as the joint is compressed. To test for this, your arm is pulled gently across your chest. Your doctor may inject a local anesthetic such as lidocaine into the joint. If the AC joint is the problem, the injection will temporarily reduce the pain.

Your doctor may want to take X-rays of the AC joint. X-rays can show narrowing of the joint and bone spurs around the joint, which are signs of degeneration.

Treatment

What treatment options are available?

Nonsurgical Treatment

Initial treatment for AC joint osteoarthritis usually consists of rest and anti-inflammatory medications such as aspirin or ibuprofen. A rehabilitation program may be directed by a physical or occupational therapist. If the pain doesn't go away, an injection of cortisone into the joint may help. Cortisone is a strong medication that decreases inflammation and reduces pain. Cortisone's effects are often temporary, but it can give very effective relief in the short term.