

Shoulder Rehab Exercises to Alleviate Pain and Improve Mobility

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Shoulder rehab exercises are crucial during stroke recovery because the ball-and-socket joint is more vulnerable to injury.

While you can improve your shoulder mobility through rehab exercise, some stroke survivors experience so much shoulder pain that they cannot participate.

To help with this, we will discuss how to treat shoulder pain and then dive into the exercises.

Causes of Shoulder Pain after Stroke

Shoulder pain after stroke can be caused by subluxation, frozen shoulder, and spasticity.

Subluxation occurs when the upper arm bone and shoulder blade have moved apart, resulting in partial dislocation. Subluxation can be caused by weak muscles in the area surrounding the shoulder, arm, and torso.

Frozen shoulder occurs when the muscles around your shoulder are very weak, stiff, or paralyzed and can't hold your bone properly in its socket. As a result, gravity pulls down on your arm and causes the shoulder joint to become inflamed, stretched, and even damaged.

Pain can also be caused by *spasticity*, which is tightness in your muscles due to brain-muscle miscommunication.

Treatment for Shoulder Pain

To treat pain due to subluxation, proper positioning is key. Good positioning will help reduce strain on your ligaments and prevent frozen shoulder from occurring.

You can use foam supports and pillows to keep your arm and shoulder supported in the correct position. Be sure to avoid using overhead slings because they could cause contractures and more pain.

Subluxation can also be treated with electrical stimulation (TENS therapy) to make the muscles contract.

To treat pain due to frozen shoulder, you can use pain killers or Botox, which reduce pain and increase flexibility. This solution is temporary, though.

To treat the root of the problem – and treat it permanently – you need to reduce the spasticity in your shoulder.

And you can reduce spasticity with rehab exercises. Let's start with a stretch that you can do every morning when you get out of bed.

Shoulder Rehab Exercise #1 WEIGHT BEARING LEAN STRETCH

You will need: A bed or bench.



From a seated position on your bed or bench, prop yourself up on your affected arm by placing your affected arm about a foot away from your body. Then lean into it.

If it feels good, feel the stretch for 10 seconds or so. And if it doesn't feel good, stop the stretch immediately.

After 10 seconds or so, place your other arm out beside you so that you're supported by both arms. Then rock from side to side, shifting your weight from one arm to the next.

You can place a rolled up towel underneath your hand to increase comfort.

You should feel this stretch in your upper torso, arm, and shoulder.

Shoulder Rehab Exercise #2 PUNCHING MOVEMENT

You will need: A tabletop and water bottle.



While seated at a table, place a water bottle arms distance in front of you. Then, make a fist with your affected hand as best you can and glide your forearm across the table and punch the water bottle. Be sure to keep your elbow and forearm on the table.

Pay close attention to shifting your weight into your affected side and try your best to avoid letting your affected shoulder lift. Elevating your affected shoulder is your body's way of compensating for weakened or stiff shoulder muscles (and avoiding compensation is the best way to get better).

If you can't help but lift your affected shoulder, that's okay. Putting in the effort to try is still helping your brain relearn how to use those muscles.

Shoulder Rehab Exercise #3 PUSHING MOVEMENT

You will need: A tabletop and water bottle.



Assume the same position as the Punching Movement and extend your affected arm out in front of you with your forearm and elbow on the table.

Place the water bottle at arms distance and then hook the outside of your affected wrist around the bottle and push it across the table as far as you can. If you can do this without moving your body, that's great. But if you need to move your body, that's okay too.

Once you've pushed the bottle as far as you can to one side, reverse. Hook the bottle from the inside of your affected wrist and push it across the table.

Again, try your best to keep your shoulder down and your forearm and elbow on the table.

Shoulder Rehab Exercise #4 CANE SLIDE MOVEMENT

You will need: A cane and a chair.



If you don't have a cane, then it's time to get crafty. Do you have another household prop that you can use? Like a broom or yardstick?

Grab whatever you can and get into a seated position.

Then hold the cane at both ends and raise it up in front of you so that your arms are parallel to the floor. With the cane out in front of your body, twist your torso to the left and right.

Slowly repeat this twist back and forth and follow your arms with your eyes. As you continue to stretch, you'll feel yourself go deeper and deeper into this twist.

Repeat 10 times, or more if it feels beneficial.

Shoulder Rehab Exercise #5 LATERAL AND CIRCULAR CANE STRETCHES

You will need: A cane and a chair.



In the Cane Slide Movement you held the cane in both hands, but you'll only be using one hand for this exercise. From a seated position, place the cane away from you at arm's length and place your affected hand on the handle. If you don't have the strength to hold the cane with just your affected hand, then secure your unaffected hand over it.

Now, lean forward while keeping yourself seated and make sure that both feet remain planted on the floor and your caboose remains in the chair. Then lean forward using the cane for support, and then lean back. You should feel this stretch all the way up your torso and into your shoulder.

When you're done with the leaning movement, try making big circular motions with your upper body while using the cane for support. You can use your unaffected hand to guide your affected side in this big circular motion.

Repeat each exercise 10 times.

Exercise Your Arms & Shoulders with Our Latest Rehab Tool

If you complete this shoulder circuit, you'll accomplish 50 repetitions – which is quite the accomplishment!

Repetition helps activate neuroplasticity and rewire your brain. So the more repetition you complete, the more your brain rewires itself and your mobility improves.