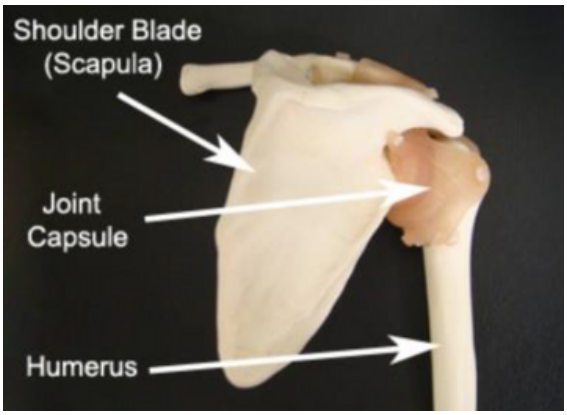
FROZEN SHOULDER

WHAT IS A FROZEN SHOULDER?

A frozen shoulder involves inflammation and tightening of the connective tissue around the shoulder joint, leading to pain and limited movement. The shoulder joint, a ball and socket type, consists of the socket from the shoulder blade and the ball from the upper arm bone (humerus), with a strong capsule of connective tissue surrounding it.



Frozen shoulders most commonly occur in people over 40 years of age and typically affect women more commonly than men. They can generally be divided into 3 phases, each of which can last a number of months:

1. Pain

In this first phase of a frozen shoulder, the shoulder typically becomes painful with most movements and it may also start to stiffen during this phase.

2. Freezing

In this second phase, there is a marked loss of movement of the shoulder, coinciding with scarring of the shoulder joint capsule. Patients typically experience difficulty when elevating the arm or taking their hand behind their back. Pain may start to decrease during this phase.

3. Thawing

In this final phase, the shoulder spontaneously begins to 'loosen' up and movement to the shoulder is gradually restored.

CAUSES

The exact cause of a frozen shoulder is unclear but is believed to arise from injury to the surrounding soft tissues of the shoulder joint. It may develop if the initial injury is not properly treated, either through inadequate rest or excessive immobility post-injury or surgery. Auto-immune diseases and diabetes can also increase the risk.

SIGNS & SYMPTOMS

Frozen shoulder symptoms usually develop gradually, starting as a dull ache that can become sharper with movement. Pain is typically deep in the shoulder but can also affect the upper arm, back, and neck. It often worsens with activities like lifting, reaching, or lying on the affected side, and is common at night or in the morning. As the condition progresses, pain may lessen but stiffness and reduced shoulder movement become more prominent.

PROGNOSIS

Most cases of frozen shoulder tend to settle after a number of months. In severe cases, symptoms may be present for 18 months or longer. Usually the painful stage of a frozen shoulder lasts 2 - 6 months. The frozen phase approximately 4 -12 months, whilst the thawing phase may last an additional 4 - 18 months. In some cases, patients may experience ongoing and permanent restriction in movement following completion of all three stages. However, most cases of frozen shoulder will have a good outcome.

OTHER INTERVENTION

Despite appropriate physiotherapy management, some patients with this condition do not improve adequately or require other interventions to ensure an optimal outcome. This may include further investigations such as X-rays, ultrasound, CT scan or MRI, pharmaceutical intervention, corticosteroid injection, hydrodilatation, and manipulation under anaesthetic or referral to either a shoulder or a pain specialist.