

Unfreezing Frozen Shoulder

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By Dr. Derek Conte

The Mayo Clinic website defines “frozen shoulder” (*adhesive capsulitis*) as “stiffness and pain in the shoulder joint that worsens over time and then resolves after two years. The cause is unknown, but it seems to be more frequent in people who’ve had a trauma or procedure that affected the mobility of the arm, such as stroke, mastectomy, fracture, diabetes, cardiovascular disease and Parkinson’s, among others. Treatments may include stretching, corticosteroid or numbing injections into the joint capsule. Surgery may be needed to loosen the joint capsule to allow free movement or ‘manipulation under anesthesia’, so the patient feels no pain but can cause bone fractures (when literally forcing the joint to its limits). Alternative medicine treatments include acupuncture and electrical stimulation to nerve pathways (there is no mention of how chiropractic can help, but I will get to that).” That’s certainly a mouthful, but there is, I think, a better way.

First, we must examine the shoulder anatomy to understand where the tightness and inflammation occur and why. The shoulder joint is a remarkable thing, giving an almost unlimited range of motion to pull, push, rotate and perform very complex tasks like throwing a baseball, but it must also be strong enough and taut enough to perform on the still rings in gymnastics. The shoulder joint is a shallow ball-in-socket joint. It is shallower than the hip joint and thus has more flexibility but comes with the trade-off of being less stable. Look at the illustrations and note the shallowness of the *glenohumeral joint* and the ligaments and seven major muscles that stabilize and move the joint. The ligaments and muscles act like very taut rubber bands to keep the surfaces of the joint closely held, but still permit proper movement. If the rubber bands become slack, the joint becomes unstable and can deteriorate or even dislocate. If, on the other hand, the rubber bands hold the joint too tight, there will be a significant loss of range of motion and the pressure in the joint will cause inflammation and a great deal of pain. So how might chiropractic help this situation?

All muscles and ligaments in the body get their cues for how tight they should be from the nerves as signaled by the brain. The nerves controlling these muscles and ligaments arise from the lower part of the neck and the upper back. If there is a restriction or misalignment in this area, the nerve irritation would produce much tighter muscles in the shoulder girdle and thus a loss of free movement and a lot of pain. If you have pain or restriction in this area, your frozen shoulder might be helped by a chiropractor. A chiropractic adjustment is intended to remove such nerve irritation and would relax the muscles and ligaments. I have had patients who after months of physical therapy, with no success, be relieved in one or two visits and get all their shoulder movement back. Chemical or surgical intervention should be explored only after all else fails. See your chiropractor for an examination.

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