

Education

Shoulder Subluxation

What is a shoulder subluxation?

A shoulder subluxation is a temporary, partial dislocation of the shoulder joint. The shoulder is a ball-and-socket joint. The ball of the upper arm bone is normally held in the socket of the shoulder blade by a group of ligaments. Ligaments are strong bands of tissue that connect the bones. In a subluxation, the ball of the upper arm bone slips partially out of the shoulder socket.

How does it occur?

A shoulder subluxation can be caused by:

- a fall onto your outstretched arm
- a direct blow to your shoulder
- having your arm forced into an awkward position.

If you have had a previous injury or if your shoulder ligaments are naturally loose, you may sublux your shoulder doing simple activities like throwing or putting on a jacket.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of a shoulder subluxation include:

- the feeling that your shoulder has gone "in and out of joint"
- looseness in your shoulder joint
- pain, weakness, or numbness in your shoulder or arm.

How is it diagnosed?

Your health care provider will ask about your symptoms and examine you. Many times the diagnosis of a shoulder subluxation is based on your description of the injury. When your provider examines you, he or she may find that your shoulder is loose and may partially slip out of joint during the exam. Your provider may order x-rays to see if you have had any fractures.

How is it treated?

The pain from a shoulder subluxation is treated by:

- putting ice packs on your shoulder for 20 to 30 minutes 3 to 4 times a day
- taking anti-inflammatory medicines such as ibuprofen
- avoiding activities that cause pain.

The most important treatment for the shoulder looseness that causes a subluxation is shoulder strengthening exercises. If your shoulder continues to sublux and cause pain and other symptoms, you may need surgery to correct the joint looseness.

How long will the effects last?

The length of recovery depends on many factors such as your age, health, and if you have had a previous shoulder injury. Recovery time also depends on the severity of the injury. If the subluxation has caused damage to structures inside your shoulder, your recovery will take longer. If your shoulder has become loose and subluxes easily, you will need ongoing rehabilitation and may need surgery.

When can I return to my normal activities?

Everyone recovers from an injury at a different rate. Return to your activities will be determined by how soon your shoulder recovers, not by how many days or weeks it has been since your injury has occurred. The goal of rehabilitation is to return you to your normal activities as soon as is safely possible. If you return too soon you may worsen your injury.

You may safely return to your activities when:

- Your injured shoulder has full range of motion without pain.
- Your injured shoulder has regained normal strength compared to the uninjured shoulder.

How can I prevent a shoulder subluxation?

Shoulder subluxations are often caused by accidents that cannot be prevented. It is important to keep your shoulders strong, especially if you have had a previous shoulder injury.

Sports Medicine Advisor 2006.4; Copyright © 2006 McKesson Corporation and/or one of its subsidiaries. All Rights Reserved. Written by Pierre Rouzier, M.D., for McKesson Provider Technologies This content is reviewed periodically and is subject to change as new health information becomes available. The information is intended to inform and educate and is not a replacement for medical evaluation, advice, diagnosis or treatment by a healthcare professional.