



Shoulder Instability

Definition: A shoulder instability usually involves the ball-and-socket part of the shoulder area, whereby the ball does not adequately stay within the socket. This is a result of torn and/or stretched tissues (ligaments) around the area and possibly weak musculature.

Common Terms: Shoulder instability, giving way, anterior, posterior, inferior, or multi-directional instability are all common terms used to describe an unstable shoulder. Technically, if the shoulder is unstable as a result of stretched or torn ligaments, then this condition can also be called a shoulder sprain. You might also hear this as a subluxation (popping out of joint and then quickly returning) or dislocation (popping out of joint and staying out).

Typical Mechanism of Injury: Most often the injury is caused by a direct blow to the shoulder or by falling on an outstretched hand. Excessive stretch of the area, as seen sometimes with activities like throwing a baseball, can also lead to an instability. In some cases, individuals are born with naturally lax (loose) shoulder joints and they can be susceptible to instabilities as well.

Common Signs and Symptoms: The most common complaint is that of “giving way”, or looseness, of the shoulder. Shoulder pain or tenderness may occur as well. Often there is pain and limitation with lifting the arm, especially above the head or across the body. Most functional activities will be difficult to perform.

Common Treatment: A shoulder instability can occur in many ways, thus there are many possible treatment options. Each option is directed toward the specific underlying cause and related damaged tissue. Typically, strengthening exercises and changes within one’s posture are implemented. In some cases, a shoulder brace may be suggested to be worn. To continue with sport and daily activities, some individuals will require surgery to repair the damaged tissue structures.

Prevention: In a contact sport such as football, it is important to learn proper tackling techniques to avoid the type of blow to the shoulder that can result in an instability. It is also important to wear proper equipment. In other sports and activities, such as baseball, where repetitive overuse lead to the tissue being stretched, having strong surrounding muscles is important.

Expectations: Shoulder instabilities require significant muscle strengthening to help a person return to an activity safely and effectively. It is not only how strong a muscle is that is important, but also its timing when it works. It is not uncommon for individuals to strength train shoulder muscles for weeks to months following an instability. Some will achieve varying levels of success while others may still not be able to perform their activity without difficulty..



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DEPARTMENT OF ORTHOPAEDICS & SPORTS MEDICINE

Carol & Frank Morsani Center for Advanced Health Care * 13330 USF Laurel Dr * Tampa, Florida 33612 * (813) 396-9625

* FAX (813) 396-9195 * www.health.usf.edu

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