

Is it really frozen shoulder?

Clinical examination may reveal that the condition is more than frozen shoulder, delaying treatment can result from a simple procedure to a complicated one.

Jack loves all types of extreme sports. But an accident occurred affecting his daily life and took him some time to find the correct diagnosis and solutions.

Jack landed on his right shoulder after a few falls during skiing. Conditions didn't improve and he consulted a doctor a week after, X-ray showed no signs of fracture, despite his pain and stiffness in the shoulder. He was treated conservatively as frozen shoulder and was prescribed with painkillers. After a few months, his pain and stiffness improved slightly. However, he had difficulty in performing daily routines likes putting on a jacket and washing hair.

"I had a couple of sessions of physiotherapy before, the pain and stiffness are tolerable, so I didn't seek further help. But it affects my daily life, I cannot exercise like I used to, especially shoulder related exercise." Jack decided to consult Dr Kelvin Tam, an orthopaedic surgeon specialising in shoulder and elbow.

Clinical examination showed that it was more than a frozen shoulder. Dr Tam suspected that his rotator cuff might have an issue. He had an MRI scan on Jack's shoulder and found out there was a full thickness complete tear on his shoulder, and severe retraction of his rotator cuff. The cuff might even be irreparable.

Dr Tam informed Jack he had a rotator cuff tear instead of frozen shoulder, "Their symptoms are really similar, without MRI, it is hard to tell a difference." says Dr Tam.

There is a misconception that if patients don't experience much pain, it is not necessary to repair the rotator cuff. But the truth is our rotator cuff is an the important stabiliser of the shoulder joint. Without the cuff, the arm would migrate upwards towards the acromion, creating impingement and rotator cuff arthropathy, and eventually degeneration of the shoulder joint. "Delaying treatment may result from a simple procedure to a complicated one." Dr Tam warns.



Rotator cuff tear can be treated by minimally invasive surgery to re-attach the tendon to the upper arm bone. For rotator cuff arthropathy, patients are required to have a shoulder arthroplasty which is a more invasive procedure.

Diagnosing shoulder conditions can be challenging, but any problems should be nipped in the bud, whether it is frozen shoulder or rotator cuff tear. If patients neglect the symptoms, it will lead to severe consequences which are avoidable if discovered at an earlier stage. If you have a shoulder injury and the pain is still persistent after 2 to 3 months, please consult your doctor as soon as possible.



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