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## Information from Your Family Doctor

# Rotator Cuff Exercises

*Am Fam Physician.* 2003 Mar 15;67(6):1315-1316.

### Before you start

The exercises described below (see Pictures 1 through 4) are to help you strengthen the muscles in your shoulder (especially the rotator cuff muscles). These exercises should not cause you pain. If the exercise hurts, stop exercising. Start again using a lighter weight.

[View/Print Figure](#)

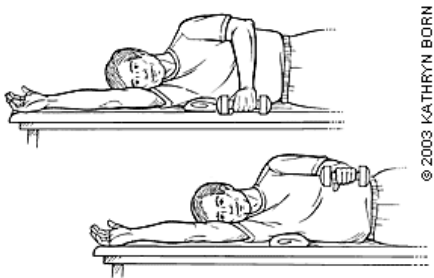


**PICTURE 1.**

Start by lying on your stomach on a table or a bed. Put your left arm out at shoulder level with your elbow bent to 90 degrees and your hand down. Keep your elbow bent and slowly raise your left hand. Stop when your hand is level with your shoulder. Lower the hand slowly. Repeat the exercise until your arm is tired. Then do the whole exercise again with your right arm.

Look at the pictures with each exercise so you can use the right position. Warm up this way before using the weights: Stretch your arms and shoulders, and do pendulum exercises. To do them, bend from the waist, letting your arms hang down. Keep your arm and shoulder muscles relaxed, and move your arms slowly back and forth. Perform each exercise slowly: lift your arm to a slow count of three and lower your arm to a slow count of six.

[View/Print Figure](#)

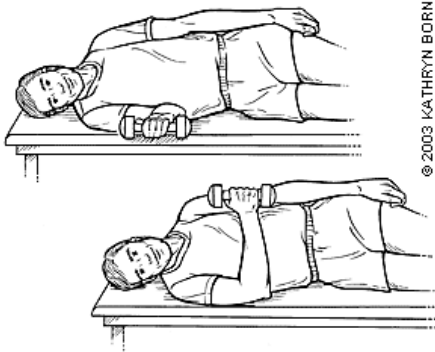


**PICTURE 2.**

Lie on your right side with a rolled-up towel under your right armpit. Stretch your right arm above your head. Keep your left arm at your side with your elbow bent to 90 degrees and the forearm resting against your chest, palm down. Roll your left shoulder out, raising the left forearm until it is level with your shoulder. (Hint: This is like the backhand swing in tennis.) Lower the arm slowly. Repeat the exercise until your arm is tired. Then do the whole exercise again with your right arm.

Now add the weights. Use a light enough weight that you do not get tired until you have done the exercise 20 to 30 times. Add a little weight each week (but never so much that the weight causes pain). Start with 2 ounces the first week, move up to 4 ounces the second week, 8 ounces the next week, and so on. Keep repeating each exercise until your arm is tired.

[View/Print Figure](#)

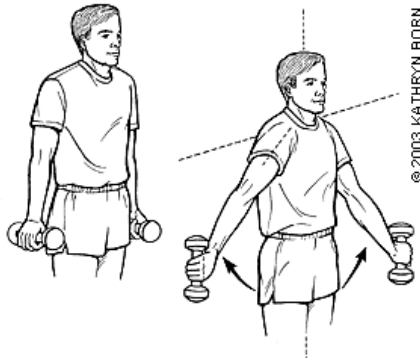


**PICTURE 3.**

Lie on your right side. Keep your left arm along the upper side of your body. Bend your right elbow to 90 degrees. Keep the right forearm resting on the table. Now roll your right shoulder in, raising your right forearm up to your chest. (Hint: This is like the forehand swing in tennis.) Lower the forearm slowly. Repeat the exercise until your arm is tired.

Each time you finish doing all four exercises, hold an ice pack on your shoulder for 20 minutes. It is best to use a plastic bag with ice cubes in it, or a bag of frozen peas, not gel packs. If you do all four exercises 3 to 5 times a week, your rotator cuff muscles will become stronger, and you will get back normal strength in your shoulder.

[View/Print Figure](#)



**PICTURE 4.**

In a standing position, start with your right arm halfway between the front and the side of your body, thumb down. Raise your right arm until almost level (about a 45-degree angle). (Hint: This is like emptying a can.) Do not lift beyond the point of pain. Slowly lower your arm. Repeat the exercise until your arm is tired. Then do the whole exercise again with your left arm. You also can work both arms at the same time.

This handout is provided to you by your family doctor and the American Academy of Family Physicians. Other health-related information is available from the AAFP online at <http://familydoctor.org>. (<http://www.familydoctor.org>).

This information provides a general overview and may not apply to everyone. Talk to your family doctor to find out if this information applies to you and to get more information on this subject.

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