Shoulder Impingement Syndrome

What is it?

Shoulder impingement syndrome refers to the impinging of structures in and around the shoulder joint that occurs with movements of the arm. This is understood if we visualize the shoulder joint as a very unstable ball and socket joint (which it is), with pain sensitive structures passing above and around it. When there are abnormal forces that influence how the ball (humerus bone of the arm) sits and moves in the socket, the position of the ball can be pulled upwards to pinch the structures above, causing pain.

What are the symptoms?

There is usually pain felt in the shoulder on moving the arm up to the side or front. The pain can sometimes occur in an "arc of motion", where pain may come on as you raise your arm, then as your arm reaches a certain point pain disappears. You may have an ache in the arm or shoulder after using it in overhead activities.

What are the causes?

There are many internal and external factors that can contribute to the development of this condition. Stiffness in the joint itself and spurs on the bones just above the joint can lead to impingement and pain. Biomechanical impairments that contribute to the development of an impingement syndrome include poor control and / or position of the scapular or head of the humerus, or poor control of the rotator cuff muscles

What should I do?

Try to avoid the aggravating positions and activities until you see a Physiotherapist - this will prevent the condition worsening. However, it is important to not cease moving the shoulder all together. If your pain is severe, discussing pain medication and anti-inflammatories with your doctor is advised, as it may also be necessary to investigate with X-RAY or ultrasound imaging to discount serious pathology. Your doctor might advise a cortisone injection as other medical management.

What shouldn't I do?

Ignore the problem. This can lead to the pain sensitive structures involved being exposed to ongoing damage. This can be quite serious if the damage progresses, it will definitely make the condition more difficult to treat and can sometimes lead to permanent damage.

Could there be any long term effects?

As mentioned above, permanent damage can be done with prolonged exposure to the impingement forces. Tendons of the rotator cuff (stabilizing muscles around the ball and socket) especially can become worn, inflamed and tear. This can lead to permanent losses of strength or range and can sometimes lead to a need for surgical repair.

Physiotherapy treatment and management

Assessment of intrinsic and contributing factors is the most important aspect of management and treatment often focuses on re-learning less harmful movement patterns for the shoulder and shoulder blade to prevent the overloading and impingement from repeating. Treatment to correct any other restricting biomechanical factors will be undertaken. When all factors are accurately assessed and addressed, the prognosis for recovery is usually good.