

Post-operative rehabilitation protocol

Superior capsular reconstruction

Keyhole reconstruction of the roof of the shoulder joint with a graft, for a rotator cuff tear that cannot be repaired. For patients, physiotherapists, and GPs.

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The plan at a glance

A graft is fixed across the top of the joint to hold the ball centred under the deltoid. The graft heals slowly. It is protected for six weeks in a sling, moved with assistance, and not loaded for three to four months.

	Phase 1 Weeks 0 to 6	Phase 2 Weeks 6 to 12	Phase 3 Months 3 to 6	Phase 4 After 6 months
Sling	With a side pillow, day and night, off for exercises	Wean off over 1 to 2 weeks	None	None
Movement	Pendulums. Assisted lift to 90° and outward turn to 30°, from week 2	Assisted, then active from week 8	Active, building to full available range	Full available range
Load	None	A cup of tea	Light resistance, up to 2 kg, from month 4	Progressive strengthening
Review	Wound check at 2 weeks. Clinic at 6 weeks	Clinic at 12 weeks	Clinic at 6 months	Clinic at 12 months

Darker shading means tighter restriction. Times are guides. Your surgeon's instructions take precedence where they differ.

Seek advice urgently if

- A wound becomes red, hot, or swollen, or it leaks or opens.
- You have a fever or feel unwell.
- Pain suddenly increases after a lift or a fall, with loss of the movement you had gained.
- The shoulder stays hot and swollen beyond the first two weeks.
- New numbness, tingling, or weakness develops in the arm or hand.
- The hand becomes cold, pale, or blue.

Call 999 or go to the Emergency Department for shortness of breath or chest pain.

For anything else on this list, contact your surgical team the same day. Out of hours, call NHS 111.

Phase 1

Protect: weeks 0 to 6

Aims: protect the graft, control pain, keep the joint from stiffening.

Do

- Wear the sling and its side pillow day and night. Take it off to wash, dress, and exercise.
- Move the fingers, wrist, and elbow fully, several times a day.
- Start gentle pendulum exercises in the first week.
- From week two, lying on your back, lift the arm with the other hand to 90°.
- From week two, with the elbow at your side, turn the forearm outwards with a stick to 30°.
- Sleep propped up, with the sling on.
- Keep the dressings dry until the wound check.

Avoid

- Lifting the arm under its own power.
- Reaching behind your back or across your body.
- Pushing up from a chair or bed with the operated arm.
- Using the hand to lift, push, or pull.
- Lying on the operated side.
- Driving.

Expected in this phase

The shoulder swells after keyhole surgery and settles in a few days. Night pain is common for the first few weeks. Sleeping propped up helps.

Phase 2

Move with help: weeks 6 to 12

Aims: come out of the sling, regain range with assistance, start unaided lifting.

Do

- Wean out of the sling over one to two weeks.
- Continue assisted lifting. Go beyond 90° as comfort allows.
- Use a pulley or table slides. The other arm does the work.
- From week eight, lift the arm under its own power, lying down first.
- Work on shoulder blade control and posture.
- Exercise in a pool once the wounds have healed.

Avoid

- Lifting anything heavier than a cup of tea.
- Resistance exercise.
- Forced stretching, especially behind the back.
- Body weight through the arm.
- Any activity with a risk of falling.

Move on to Phase 3 when

Twelve weeks have passed and you can lift the arm unaided lying down.

Phase 3

Active movement and early strength: months 3 to 6

Aims: lift in sitting and standing, light strength.

Do

- Lift the arm in sitting and standing without hitching the shoulder.
- Start static (isometric) deltoid and rotator cuff exercises.
- Start light resistance bands from month four.
- Strengthen the front of the deltoid and the shoulder blade muscles.
- Stretch gently to the end of range.
- Use the arm for daily tasks at and above shoulder height.

Avoid

- Lifting more than 2 kg.
- Sudden or jerking movements.
- Heavy overhead work.
- Heavy manual work and sport.

Move on to Phase 4 when

Six months have passed and the arm lifts above shoulder height in standing.

Phase 4

Return: after 6 months

Aims: best possible strength and function.

- Progress strengthening as the shoulder allows.
- Return to swimming, golf, and gardening in stages.
- Discuss heavy manual work with your surgeon before returning.

What to expect

Improvement continues for 12 months or more. The aims are less pain and a comfortable lift above shoulder height. Strength for heavy overhead work does not usually return.

Return to activity

Typical times from surgery. Each depends on comfort, movement, and healing.

Activity	From	Condition
Desk work	2 to 4 weeks	One-handed, in the sling
Light tasks at waist level	6 weeks	Out of the sling
Driving	8 to 10 weeks	Out of the sling, able to control the wheel. Tell your insurer.
Pool exercise	8 weeks	Wounds healed
Running	12 weeks	Comfortable arm swing
Light manual work	4 months	Within the 2 kg limit, then building
Light gym resistance	4 months	As directed by your therapist
Swimming	4 to 6 months	Breaststroke first
Golf	6 months	Putting and chipping first
Heavy manual work	6 to 9 months	Discuss with your surgeon. It may not be advised.

When to slow the protocol

Some patients need more time. Your surgeon will tell you if any of these apply.

- **Subscapularis repair at the same operation.** Outward turning is limited to straight ahead for six weeks. No resisted inward turning for twelve.
- **Partial repair of the remaining rotator cuff.** The same phases apply.
- **Graft taken from your own thigh.** The thigh wound is sore for two to three weeks. Walking is unrestricted.
- **Reconstruction using the biceps tendon.** The same phases apply. Your surgeon may allow unaided lifting from six weeks.
- **Smoking and diabetes.** Both slow healing. Stop smoking and vaping nicotine. Keep blood sugar well controlled.

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This protocol is general guidance for uncomplicated arthroscopic superior capsular reconstruction. It is not a substitute for individual medical advice. Instructions from your own surgeon and therapist take precedence.

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