

Shoulder Impingement (Subacromial Decompression)



What is it?

Subacromial decompression (also called acromioplasty) is a surgical procedure to remove inflammation around the muscles and treat shoulder impingement.

Shoulder impingement occurs when the tendons that support the rotator cuff muscles become dysfunctional and damaged. The rotator cuff is a rubbery tissue that connects the muscles around your shoulder joint to the top of your arm.

Procedure Advantages

Most patients benefit from significant shoulder pain relief and improved shoulder movement as a result of shoulder decompression. The recovery process is variable and may take 3 – 6 months to fully recover.

What it involves

Arthroscopic (Keyhole)

Subacromial decompression is usually done as a keyhole procedure. It uses a narrow, flexible telescopic camera called an arthroscope and is done under general anaesthetic. You may also be given a local anaesthetic into the nerves around your shoulder. This will help to ease the pain you may feel after your operation.

Your surgeon will put the arthroscope into your shoulder through small cuts in your skin to look inside your shoulder. Specially designed surgical instruments are inserted through the cuts to carry out the subacromial decompression.

At the end of the operation, your surgeon will remove the surgical instruments and close the cuts - usually with stitches.

Possible Risks

Potential risks and complications for arthroscopy and open surgery include:

- Shoulder stiffness
- Pain and stiffness around the shoulder after surgery – especially when moving
- Damage to blood vessels or nerves
- Infection (risk is reduced for arthroscopic surgery compared to open surgery)

What happens after

You will need to rest until the effects of the anaesthetic have worn off. You will be offered pain relief to help with any discomfort as the anaesthetic wears off.

Having general anaesthesia can affect your coordination and reasoning skills for a short time. So, do not drive, drink alcohol, operate machinery or sign legal documents for 24 hours afterwards. Always follow your surgeon's advice.

Before you leave the hospital, your consultant will give you advice about caring for your wounds and tell you what to do about any stitches you have. Your stitches will need to be taken out after 10 to 14 days. You may need to keep your arm in a sling for up to three weeks after your operation.

Your shoulder joint is likely to feel sore and stiff for a while. Using a cold compress, such as an ice pack or a bag of frozen peas wrapped in a towel may help to reduce swelling. Do not put ice directly onto your bare shoulder as it can damage your skin.

If you need pain relief, you can take over-the-counter painkillers such as paracetamol or ibuprofen. Always read the patient information leaflet that comes with the medicine. If you have any questions, ask your pharmacist.