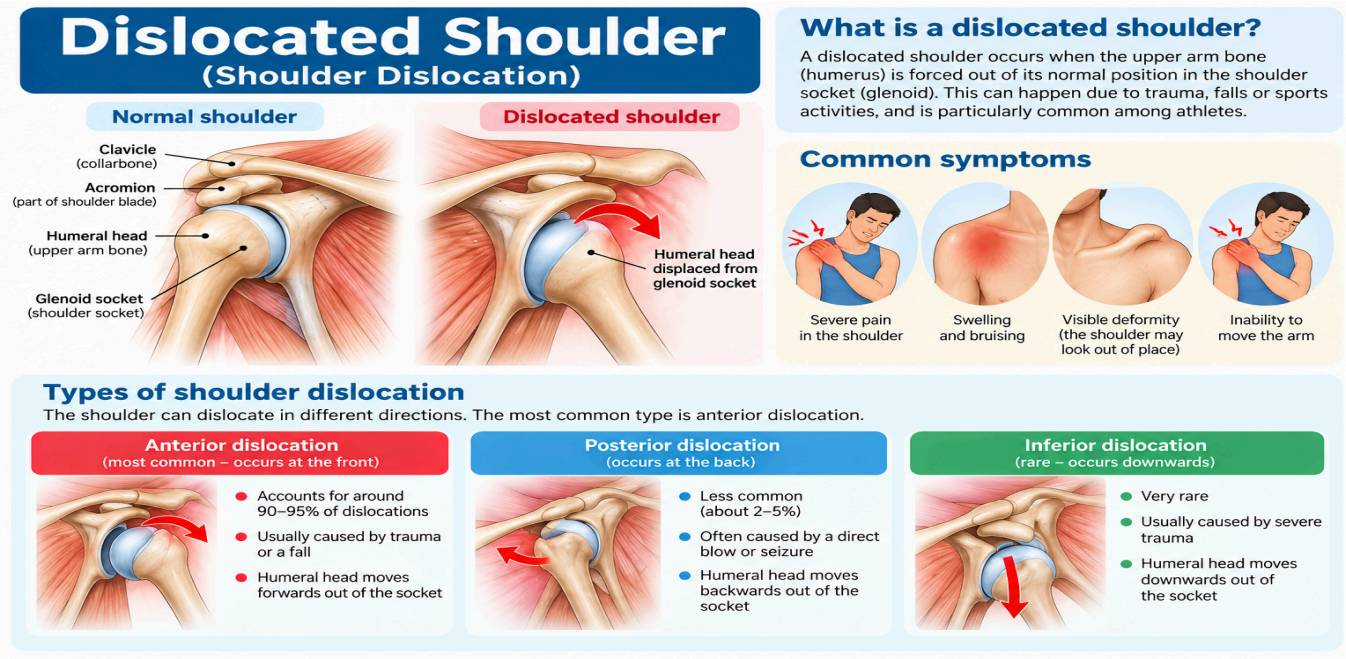
Dislocated Shoulder

Understanding shoulder injury, symptoms and diagnosis

Dislocated Shoulder

A guide to symptoms, treatment and recovery



What is a dislocated shoulder?

A shoulder dislocation happens when the upper arm bone (humerus) moves out of its normal position in the shoulder socket (glenoid). It can follow a fall, trauma or a sporting injury.

Common symptoms

Severe shoulder pain; swelling or bruising; visible change in shoulder shape; and difficulty or inability moving the arm.

IMPORTANT - seek urgent medical assessment

A suspected shoulder dislocation requires prompt medical care. Do not attempt to push the joint back into place yourself.

Diagnosis and treatment

Medical assessment and a staged recovery plan

1. Physical examination

A healthcare professional checks shoulder appearance, movement, pain and possible injury to nerves or blood vessels.

2. Imaging tests

X-rays help confirm the dislocation and identify fractures. MRI may be used when ligament or other soft-tissue damage is suspected.

3. Immediate care

Rest and support the affected arm. Ice packs may help swelling and pain; wrap ice in a towel and follow professional advice.

4. Reduction and immobilisation

A trained clinician repositions the joint (reduction), often with pain relief or sedation. A sling or brace may then be advised for a period appropriate to the injury.

5. Rehabilitation

Physiotherapy helps restore shoulder mobility, strength and confidence. Exercises and intensity are progressed according to healing and clinical guidance.

Important

Follow the emergency or orthopaedic team's instructions about sling use and when to begin movement.

Exercises and rehabilitation

Gentle strengthening under professional guidance

Shoulder exercise examples

The original leaflet illustrates six isometric exercises: external rotation, internal rotation, adduction, flexion, extension and abduction. Ask your physiotherapist which are suitable.



Prevention tips

- Strength training: Strengthen shoulder muscles through targeted exercises.
- Technique improvement: Use proper techniques for sports and physical activities.
- Avoid high-risk activities: Be cautious of falls or shoulder impacts.

Exercise safely

Only start exercises once your clinician says it is safe. Avoid movements that increase pain or make the shoulder feel unstable. Progress gradually.

Precautions and next steps

Reducing the risk of further shoulder injury

Strength training

Build shoulder and upper-body strength through exercises recommended by your physiotherapist.

Technique improvement

Use appropriate technique during sport, exercise and physical activities to reduce shoulder strain.

Avoid high-risk activities

Take care with activities that increase the risk of falls, collision or impact to the shoulder.

Follow your recovery plan

Follow advice on sling use, returning to sport, driving and work. Seek review if pain, weakness or instability persists.

Key message

With timely medical treatment and guided rehabilitation, many people regain good shoulder function. Seek individual advice about your recovery.

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