

Rotator Cuff Repair: Week-by-Week Guide

A printable week-by-week guide to rotator cuff repair recovery - sling protection, restoring range, rebuilding strength and returning to sport.

At a Glance

- The repair must heal before it can be loaded - protection comes first
- Follow the sling schedule exactly; do not remove it early
- Movement order: passive range > gentle activation > strength > sport
- Return to throwing or heavy lifting is earned by criteria, not a calendar date

The First Weeks

Week 0-6 (protection):

- Wear the sling as directed - often day and night for 4-6 weeks
- Do gentle pendulum exercises only if cleared
- Move the hand, wrist and elbow freely
- Do not lift, pull, push or reach with the operated arm
- Sleep supported with pillows to avoid rolling onto the shoulder

Week 6-12 (early movement):

- Start active-assisted range with the other arm, a wand or a table
- Begin isometric shoulder holds as cleared
- Work shoulder-blade control with scapular retractions
- Stop using the sling gradually as directed

Months 3-6 (strength)

- Progress to external rotation with a band and internal rotation
- Add progressive scapular and shoulder strengthening
- Use very light loads; no heavy or overhead lifting without clearance

Months 6-12 (return)

- Progress resistance one variable at a time
- Return to overhead work and throwing only when strength and range criteria are met
- Keep strengthening long after symptoms settle
- Use return-to-sport testing, not a date on the calendar

Do This

- Protect the repair in the first 6 weeks - it is weakest then
- Keep the hand, wrist and elbow moving while the shoulder rests
- Do the passive-range work even though it seems "too easy"
- Follow the rotator cuff repair rehabilitation guide phases

Avoid This

- Removing the sling too early
- Actively lifting the arm overhead during the protection phase
- Pulling, pushing or supporting body weight on the arm until cleared
- Returning to lifting or throwing before strength criteria are met

When to See Someone

Contact your surgeon for a red, hot or leaking wound, fever, sudden severe pain, or a shoulder that looks or feels out of place.

References

1. AAOS OrthoInfo. "Rotator Cuff Tears." <https://www.orthoinfo.org/en/diseases--conditions/rotator-cuff-tears/>
2. JOSPT. "An Update of Systematic Reviews Examining the Effectiveness of Conservative Physical Therapy Interventions for Subacromial Shoulder Pain." 2020. <https://www.jospt.org/doi/10.2519/jospt.2020.8498>

***This information is for education only and is not a medical diagnosis.** InjuryAtlas does not replace an assessment by a qualified health professional. Always follow your surgeon's specific post-operative protocol.*