

Swimmers Shoulder

by Michael Woodcock



Swimmers both recreational and elite may experience shoulder problems at some time in their life. In fact 40-70% of swimmers report shoulder problems. Because approximately 90% of propulsion comes from the shoulder, it is subject to accumulative stress (pain can be diffuse in the shoulder or at specific locations and most swimmers feel pain during the first half of the pull through). The rotator cuff muscles can develop fatigue and the repetitive stress can lead to laxity and dysfunction.

Some biomechanical problems leading to pain are

1. Insufficient body roll ($\approx 45^\circ$ in freestyle and backstroke is recommended)
2. Catching too close to the midline leads to impingement
3. Low elbow action during recovery (may be due to tightness in the shoulder capsule associated muscular tightness)
4. Use of hand paddles increases the incidence of shoulder pain.

Swimmers can get tight in major muscle groups and need regular stretching exercises (lats, pecs, triceps and posterior shoulder capsule)

(Massage for those tight muscle groups is also helpful)

Thoracic spine stiffness with forward rounded shoulders can be a postural outcome and hence thoracic spine strengthening and stretching is important.

Rotator cuff strengthening may be indicated if there is weakness and scapular co-ordination exercises can be helpful when hitching of the shoulder girdle is apparent.

Core stability exercises are important as fatigue can lead to stress on the shoulder.

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Michael was Adelaide 36ers physiotherapist for 21 years before his retirement from the team in 2008. He has also worked with National League Soccer and national basketball and volleyball teams. His particular interests are shoulders, jumping injuries, swimming injuries, exercise therapy and acupuncture.

He is a life member of the Adelaide 36ERS and Burnside Swimming Club.

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