

**Adam Seidl, MD**  
Associate Professor  
Shoulder/Elbow Surgery  
Department of Orthopedics  
University of Colorado



**Orthopedics**  
UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO

**Highlands Ranch Hospital**  
(720) 516-4090  
**Inverness**  
(303) 694-3333  
**Anschutz Medical Campus**  
(720) 848-1900

## Rotator Cuff Home Exercise Program

This is a general conditioning program that provides a wide range of exercises.

Your doctor, athletic trainer, or physical therapist can help guide you through this program, which is broken up into 3 parts:

**Range of motion** - you should do this every day to help get your motion back.

**Flexibility** - you should do this every day to help stretch tight tissues.

**Strengthening** - you should do this 3 or 4 days each week to help get your strength back.

**Length of program:** This shoulder conditioning program should be continued for 4 to 6 weeks, unless otherwise specified by your doctor or physical therapist. After your recovery, these exercises can be continued as a maintenance program for lifelong protection and health of your shoulders. Performing the exercises two to three days a week will maintain strength and range of motion in your shoulders.

### Getting Started

**Warmup:** Before doing the following exercises, warm up with 5 to 10 minutes of low impact activity, like walking or riding a stationary bicycle.

**Stretch:** After the warm-up, do the stretching exercises shown on Page 1 before moving on to the strengthening exercises. When you have completed the strengthening exercises, repeat the stretching exercises to end the program.

**Do not ignore pain:** You should not feel pain during an exercise. Talk to your doctor or physical therapist if you have any pain while exercising.

## 1. Pendulum

**Main muscles worked:** Deltoids, supraspinatus, infraspinatus, subscapularis

**Equipment needed:** None

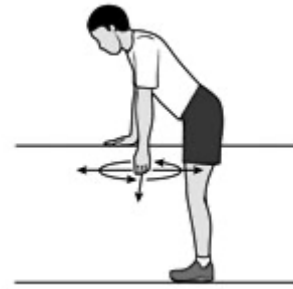
**Repetitions:** 2 sets of 10

**Days Per Week:** 5 to 6

### Step-by-step directions

- Lean forward and place one hand on a counter or table for support. Let your other arm hang freely at your side.
- Gently swing your arm forward and back. Repeat the exercise moving your arm side-to-side, and repeat again in a circular motion.
- Repeat the entire sequence with the other arm.

**Tip:** Do not round your back or lock your knees.



## 2. Crossover Arm Stretch

**Main muscles worked:** Posterior deltoid

*You should feel this stretch at the back of your shoulder*

**Equipment needed:** None

**Repetitions:** 4 each side

**Days Per Week:** 5 to 6

### Step-by-step directions

- Relax your shoulders and gently pull one arm across your chest as far as possible, holding at your upper arm.
- Hold the stretch for 30 seconds and then relax for 30 seconds.
- Repeat with the other arm.

**Tip:** Do not pull or put pressure on your elbow.



## 3. Passive Internal Rotation

**Main muscles worked:** Subscapularis

*You should feel this stretch at the front of your shoulder*

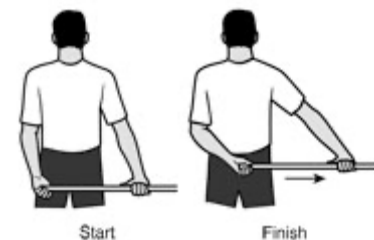
**Equipment needed:** Light stick, such as a yardstick

**Repetitions:** 4 each side

**Days Per Week:** 5 to 6

### Step-by-step directions

- Hold a stick behind your back with one hand, and lightly grasp the other end of the stick with your other hand.



- Pull the stick horizontally as shown so that your shoulder is passively stretched to the point of feeling a pull without pain.
- Hold for 30 seconds and then relax for 30 seconds.
- Repeat on the other side.

**Tip:** Do not lean over or twist to side while pulling the stick.

## 4. Passive External Rotation

**Main muscles worked:** Infraspinatus, teres minor  
*You should feel this stretch in the back of your shoulder*

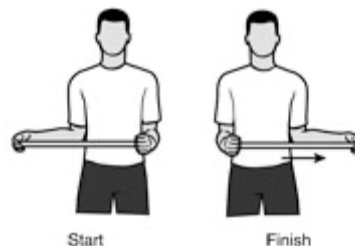
**Equipment needed:** Light stick, such as a yardstick

**Repetitions:** 4 each side

**Days Per Week:** 5 to 6

### Step-by-step directions

- Grasp the stick with one hand and cup the other end of the stick with the other hand.
- Keep the elbow of the shoulder you are stretching against the side of your body and push the stick horizontally as shown to the point of feeling a pull without pain.
- Hold for 30 seconds and then relax for 30 seconds.
- Repeat on the other side.



**Tip:** Keep your hips facing forward and do not twist.

## 5. Sleeper Stretch

**Main muscles worked:** Infraspinatus, teres minor  
*You should feel this stretch in your outer upper back, behind your shoulder*

**Equipment needed:** None

**Repetitions:** 4 reps, 3x a day

**Days Per Week:** Daily

### Step-by-step directions

- Lie on your side on a firm, flat surface with the affected shoulder under you and your arm bent, as shown. You can place your head on a pillow for comfort, if needed.
- Use your unaffected arm to push your other arm down. Stop pressing down when you feel a stretch in the back of your affected shoulder.
- Hold this position for 30 seconds, then relax your arm for 30 seconds.



**Tip:** Do not bend your wrist or press down on your wrist.

## 6. Standing Row

**Main muscles worked:** Middle and lower trapezius

*You should feel this exercise at the back of your shoulder and into your upper back*

**Equipment needed:** Use an elastic stretch band of comfortable resistance. As the exercise becomes easier to perform, progress to 3 sets of 12 repetitions. If you have access to a fitness center, this exercise can also be performed on a weight machine. A fitness assistant at your gym can instruct you on how to use the machines safely.

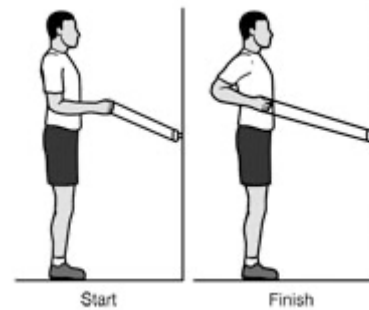
**Repetitions:** 3 sets of 8

**Days Per Week:** 3

### Step-by-step directions

- Make a 3-foot-long loop with the elastic band and tie the ends together. Attach the loop to a doorknob or other stable object.
- Stand holding the band with your elbow bent and at your side, as shown in the start position.
- Keep your arm close to your side and slowly pull your elbow straight back.
- Slowly return to the start position and repeat.

**Tip:** Squeeze your shoulder blades together as you pull.



## 7. External Rotation With Arm Abducted 90°

**Main muscles worked:** Infraspinatus and teres minor

*You should feel this exercise at the back of your shoulder and into your upper back*

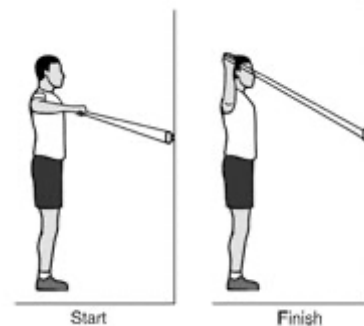
**Equipment needed:** Use an elastic stretch band of comfortable resistance. As the exercise becomes easier to perform, progress to 3 sets of 12 repetitions. If you have access to a fitness center, this exercise can also be performed on a weight machine. A fitness assistant at your gym can instruct you on how to use the machines safely.

**Repetitions:** 3 sets of 8

**Days Per Week:** 3

### Step-by-step directions

- Make a 3-foot-long loop with the elastic band and tie the ends together. Attach the loop to a doorknob or other stable object.
- Stand holding the band with your elbow bent 90° and raised to shoulder-height, as shown in the start position.
- Keeping your shoulder and elbow level, slowly raise your hand until it is in line with your head.



- Slowly return to the start position and repeat.

**Tip:** Make sure your elbow stays in line with your shoulder.

## 8. Internal Rotation

**Main muscles worked:** Pectoralis, subscapularis

*You should feel this exercise at your chest and shoulder*

**Equipment needed:** Use an elastic stretch band of comfortable resistance. As the exercise becomes easier to perform, progress to 3 sets of 12 repetitions. If you have access to a fitness center, this exercise can also be performed on a weight machine. A fitness assistant at your gym can instruct you on how to use the machines safely.

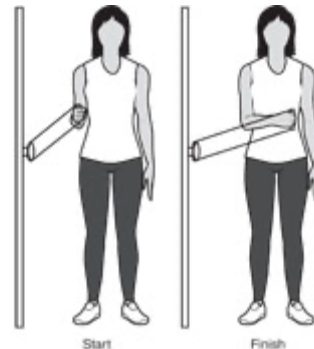
**Repetitions:** 3 sets of 8

**Days Per Week:** 3

### Step-by-step directions

- Make a 3-foot-long loop with the elastic band and tie the ends together. Attach the loop to a doorknob or other stable object.
- Stand holding the band with your elbow bent and at your side, as shown in the start position.
- Keep your elbow close to your side and bring your arm across your body.
- Slowly return to the start position and repeat.

**Tip:** Keep your elbow pressed into your side.



## 9. External Rotation

**Main muscles worked:** Infraspinatus, teres minor, posterior deltoid

*You should feel this stretch in the back of your shoulder and upper back*

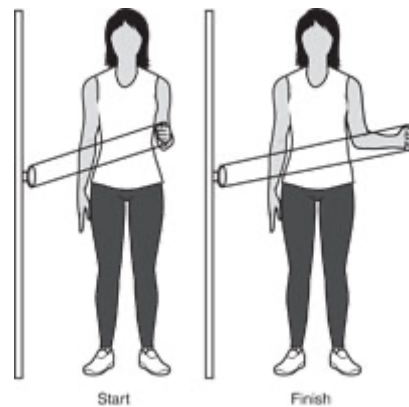
**Equipment needed:** Use an elastic stretch band of comfortable resistance. As the exercise becomes easier to perform, progress to 3 sets of 12 repetitions. If you have access to a fitness center, this exercise can also be performed on a weight machine. A fitness assistant at your gym can instruct you on how to use the machines safely.

**Repetitions:** 3 sets of 8

**Days Per Week:** 3

### Step-by-step directions

- Make a 3-foot-long loop with the elastic band and tie the ends together.
- Attach the loop to a doorknob or other stable object.
- Stand holding the band with your elbow bent and at your side, as shown in the start position.
- Keeping your elbow close to your side, slowly rotate your arm outward.



- Slowly return to the start position and repeat.

**Tip:** Squeeze your shoulder blades together when you pull your elbow back.

## 10. Elbow Flexion

**Main muscles worked:** Biceps

*You should feel this exercise at the front of your upper arm*

**Equipment needed:** Begin with a weight that allows 3 sets of 8 repetitions and progress to 3 sets of 12 repetitions. As the exercise becomes easier, add weight in 1-pound increments to a maximum of 5 pounds. Each time you increase the weight, start again at 3 sets of 8 repetitions.

**Repetitions:** 3 sets of 8

**Days Per Week:** 3

### Step-by-step directions

- Stand tall with your weight evenly distributed over both feet.
- Keep your elbow close to your side and slowly bring the weight up toward your shoulder as shown.
- Hold for 2 seconds.
- Slowly return to the starting position and repeat.

**Tip:** Do not do the exercise too quickly or swing your arm.



## 11. Elbow Extension

**Main muscles worked:** Triceps

*You should feel this exercise at the back of your upper arm*

**Equipment needed:** Begin with a weight that allows 3 sets of 8 repetitions and progress to 3 sets of 12 repetitions. As the exercise becomes easier, add weight in 1-pound increments to a maximum of 5 pounds. Each time you increase the weight, start again at 3 sets of 8 repetitions.

**Repetitions:** 3 sets of 8

**Days Per Week:** 3

### Step-by-step directions

- Stand tall with your weight evenly distributed over both feet.
- Raise your arm and bend your elbow with the weight behind your head.
- Support your arm by placing your opposite hand on your upper arm.
- Slowly straighten your elbow and bring the weight overhead.
- Hold for 2 seconds.
- Slowly lower your arm back down behind your head and repeat.



**Tip:** Keep your abdominal muscles tight and do not arch your back.

## 12. Trapezius Strengthening

**Main muscles worked:** Middle and posterior deltoid, supraspinatus, middle trapezius

*You should feel this exercise at the back of your shoulder and into your upper back*

**Equipment needed:** Begin with a light enough weight to allow 3 to 4 sets of 20 repetitions without pain. As the exercise becomes easier to perform, add 2 to 3 pounds of weight, but do fewer repetitions. Progress to 3 sets of 15 repetitions at each weight increment, with the maximum weight approximately 5 to 7 pounds.

**Repetitions:** 3 sets of 20

**Days Per Week:** 3 to 5

### Step-by-step directions

- Place your knee on a bench or chair and lean forward so that your hand reaches the bench and helps support your weight. Your other hand is at your side, palm facing your body.
- Slowly raise your arm, rotating your hand to the thumbs-up position and stopping when your hand is shoulder height, with your arm parallel to the floor.
- Slowly lower your arm to the original position to a count of 5.

**Tip:** Use a weight that makes the last few repetitions difficult, but pain-free.



## 13. Scapula Setting

**Main muscles worked:** Middle trapezius, serratus

*You should feel this exercise in your upper back, at your shoulder blade*

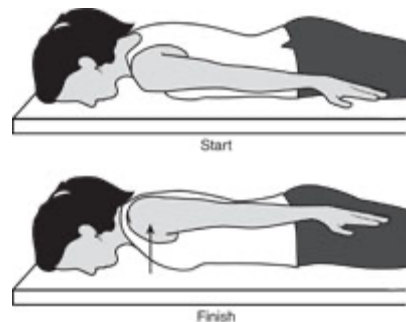
**Equipment needed:** None

**Repetitions:** 10

**Days Per Week:** 3

### Step-by-step directions

- Lie on your stomach with your arms by your sides.
- Place a pillow under your forehead for comfort, if required.
- Gently draw your shoulder blades together and down your back as far as possible.
- Ease about halfway off from this position and hold for 10 seconds.



- Relax and repeat 10 times.

**Tip:** Do not tense up in your neck.

## 14. Scapular Retraction/Protraction

**Main muscles worked:** Middle trapezius, serratus

*You should feel this exercise in your upper back at your shoulder blade*

**Equipment needed:** Begin with a weight that allows 2 sets of 8 to 10 repetitions and progress to 3 sets of 15 repetitions. As the exercise becomes easier, add weight in 1-pound increments to a maximum of 5 pounds. Each time you increase the weight, start again at 2 sets of 8 to 10 repetitions.

**Repetitions:** 2 sets of 10

**Days Per Week:** 3

### Step-by-step directions

- Lie on your stomach on a table or bed with your injured arm hanging over the side.
- Keep your elbow straight and lift the weight slowly by squeezing your shoulder blade toward the opposite side as far as possible.
- Return slowly to the starting position and repeat.

**Tip:** Do not shrug your shoulder toward your ear.



## 15. Bent-Over Horizontal Abduction

**Main muscles worked:** Middle and lower trapezius, Infraspinatus, teres minor, posterior deltoid

*You should feel this exercise at the back of your shoulder and into your upper back*

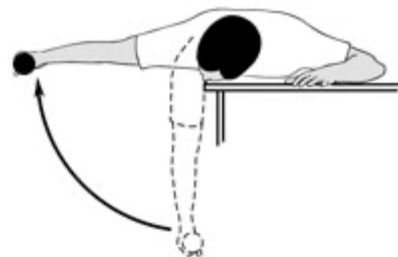
**Equipment needed:** Begin with a weight that allows 3 sets of 8 repetitions and progress to 3 sets of 12 repetitions. As the exercise becomes easier, add weight in 1-pound increments to a maximum of 5 pounds. Each time you increase the weight, start again at 3 sets of 8 repetitions.

**Repetitions:** 3 sets of 8

**Days Per Week:** 3

### Step-by-step directions

- Lie on your stomach on a table or bed with your injured arm hanging over the side.
- Keep your arm straight and slowly raise it up to eye level.





- Slowly lower it back to the starting position and repeat.

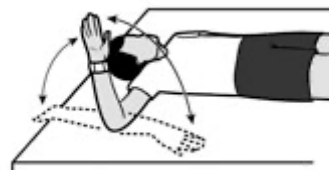
**Tip:** Control the movement as you lower the weight.

## 16. Internal and External Rotation

**Main muscles worked:** Internal rotation: anterior deltoid, pectoralis, subscapularis, latissimus.

External rotation: posterior deltoid, infraspinatus, teres minor

*You should feel this exercise in the front and back of your shoulder, your chest, and upper back*



**Equipment needed:** Begin with a light enough weight to allow 3 to 4 sets of 20 repetitions without pain. As the exercise becomes easier to perform, add 2 to 3 pounds of weight, but do fewer repetitions. Progress to 3 sets of 15 repetitions at each weight increment, with the maximum weight approximately 5 to 7 pounds.

**Repetitions:** 3 to 4 sets of 20

**Days Per Week:** 3 to 5

### Step-by-step directions

- Lie on your back on a flat surface.
- Extend your arm straight out from the shoulder and bend the elbow 90° so that your fingers are pointed up.
- Keeping your elbow bent and on the floor, slowly move your arm in the arc shown. Bring your elbow down to a 45° angle if you experience pain at 90°.

**Tip:** Use a weight that makes the last few repetitions difficult, but pain-free.

## 17. External Rotation

**Main muscles worked:** Infraspinatus, teres minor, posterior deltoid

*You should feel this stretch in the back of your shoulder and upper back*

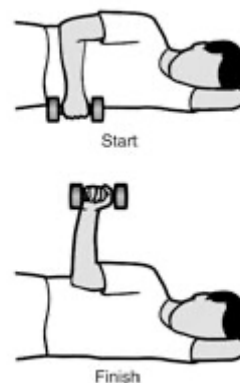
**Equipment needed:** Begin with weights that allow 2 sets of 8 to 10 repetitions (approximately 1 to 2 pounds), and progress to 3 sets of 5 repetitions. As the exercise becomes easier, add weight in 1-pound increments to a maximum of 5 pounds. Each time you increase the weight, start again at 2 sets of 8 to 10 repetitions.

**Repetitions:** 2 sets of 10

**Days Per Week:** 3

### Step-by-step directions

- Lie on your side on a firm, flat surface with your unaffected arm under you, cradling your head.



- Hold your injured arm against your side as shown, with your elbow bent at a 90° angle.
- Keep your elbow against your side and slowly rotate your arm at the shoulder, raising the weight to a vertical position.
- Slowly lower the weight to the starting position to a count of 5.

**Tip:** Do not let your body roll back as you raise the weight.

## 18. Internal Rotation

**Main muscles worked:** Subscapularis, teres major  
*You should feel this stretch in the front of your shoulder*

**Equipment needed:** Begin with weights that allow 2 sets of 8 to 10 repetitions (approximately 1 to 2 pounds), and progress to 3 sets of 5 repetitions. As the exercise becomes easier, add weight in 1-pound increments to a maximum of 5 pounds. Each time you increase the weight, start again at 2 sets of 8 to 10 repetitions.

**Repetitions:** 2 sets of 10

**Days Per Week:** 3

### **Step-by-step directions**

- Lie on a firm, flat surface on the side of your affected arm.
- Place a pillow or folded cloth under your head to keep your spine straight.
- Hold your injured arm against your side as shown, with your elbow bent at a 90° angle.
- Keep your elbow bent and against your body and slowly rotate your arm at the shoulder, raising the weight to a vertical position.
- Slowly lower the weight to the starting position.

**Tip:** Do not let your body roll back as you raise the weight.