Frozen Shoulder (Adhesive Capsulitis)

This handout is provided to you by Dr Chen Tu and the team at Wakefield Orthopaedic Clinic. Our aim is to help you understand frozen shoulder, why it occurs, and how it is treated.

What Is Frozen Shoulder?

Frozen shoulder, also known as **adhesive capsulitis**, is a condition where the capsule (lining) of the shoulder joint becomes inflamed, thickened, and tight. This leads to shoulder pain and a gradual loss of movement. Frozen shoulder can be:

- **Primary**, developing without a clear cause
- **Secondary**, occurring after shoulder injury, surgery, or another shoulder condition

Regardless of how it starts, frozen shoulder behaves in a similar way and is treated using the same principles. The condition affects around **5% of people**, most commonly between the ages of **40 and 60**, and is more common in women and in people with diabetes or thyroid disease.

How Frozen Shoulder Progresses

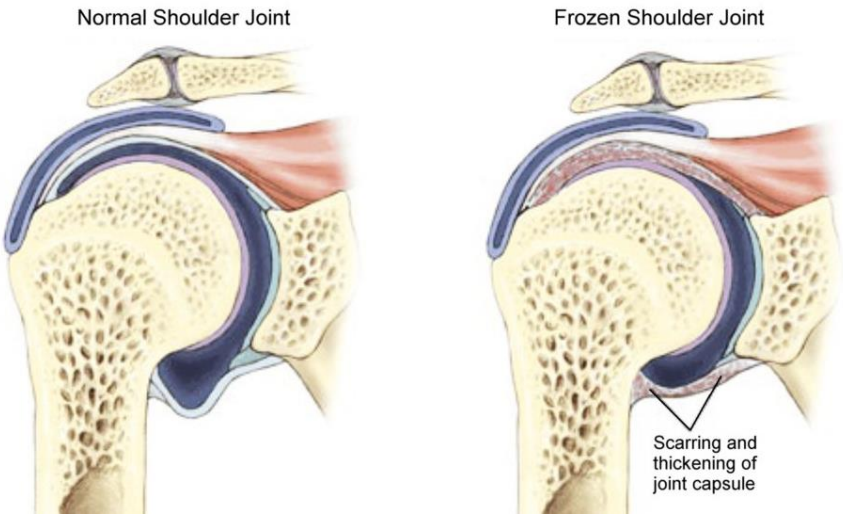
Frozen shoulder typically progresses through overlapping phases:

- **Pain (freezing / inflammation):**
  Inflammation develops within the shoulder capsule, leading to pain. Movement may still seem relatively preserved early on, which is why frozen shoulder can be difficult to recognise at first.
- **Stiffness (frozen / scar tissue):**
  Ongoing inflammation leads to thickening and tightening of the capsule, with the formation of scar tissue. Pain may improve, but stiffness becomes the main problem.
- **Gradual resolution (thawing):**
  Over time, inflammation settles and scar tissue slowly softens, allowing shoulder movement to gradually improve.

This explains why frozen shoulder often starts with pain, with stiffness becoming more obvious later.

Symptoms

- Shoulder pain, often deep and aching
- Pain that is worse at night and affects sleep
- Progressive loss of shoulder movement in all directions
- Difficulty with everyday activities such as dressing, reaching overhead, or reaching behind the back



Treatment Approach

Treatment focuses on settling pain, restoring **functional movement**, and allowing the condition to resolve naturally where possible.

Hydrodilatation

Most patients present once some stiffness has already developed.

- Hydrodilatation involves injecting fluid, usually with steroid, into the shoulder joint to stretch the capsule and reduce inflammation.
- Dr Chen Tu may **order hydrodilatation**, which is performed by a radiologist under imaging guidance.
- In many patients, this is enough to:
    - Improve pain
    - Restore movement to **functional levels**

Once pain is controlled and functional movement is regained, the shoulder often continues to improve gradually over time without further intervention.

Physiotherapy

Physiotherapy is used to maintain and gently improve movement. Exercises should be controlled and not forced, as aggressive stretching can worsen pain.

Surgery

- Surgery is **not commonly required** for frozen shoulder.
- Most cases, particularly **primary frozen shoulder**, improve without surgery.
- In Dr Chen Tu's practice, only a **small proportion of patients** require surgery, usually when stiffness remains severe despite appropriate non-surgical treatment.
- Surgery is aimed at releasing tight scar tissue and is followed by rehabilitation.

What to Expect

- Frozen shoulder is a **self-limiting condition**
- Recovery can take **many months**
- Full movement may not return immediately, but functional use usually improves earlier
- Further gradual improvement often continues with time

Key Reassurance

Frozen shoulder can be painful and frustrating, but it almost always improves. The goal of treatment is to control pain, restore useful movement, and allow the condition to resolve naturally whenever possible.

Contact Information

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Conclusion

Frozen shoulder may develop on its own (primary) or after injury or surgery (secondary). It typically progresses from pain due to inflammation, to stiffness from scar tissue, followed by gradual resolution. In most cases, non-surgical treatment is sufficient to restore functional movement and allow recovery over time.