

Why treating shoulder pain in baseball pitchers is so difficult

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Results of treating shoulder pain in baseball pitchers and other throwing athletes are not as predictable as doctors, patients and coaches would like to think, according to a report in the journal *Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation Clinics of North America*.

Nickolas Garbis, MD, an orthopedic surgeon who specializes in shoulder and elbow injuries at Loyola University Medical Center, is the primary author.

Shoulder pain occurs in athletes who play sports that require rapid acceleration and deceleration of the throwing arm. They include baseball pitchers, tennis players, softball pitchers and javelin throwers, as well as athletes who play handball and water polo.

Overhead throwing generates a large amount of stress on the shoulder, which is one of the most mobile joints in the body. This makes it vulnerable to injury.

It is difficult to diagnose the cause of [shoulder pain](#). The shoulder is comprised of four joints, and a problem with any of them can cause pain and affect performance. Moreover, many of these structures are deep in the shoulder and therefore difficult to examine by touch. Also, the same kind of pain can be due to multiple causes. For example, [pain](#) in the front of the shoulder can be due to rotator cuff tendinitis, rotator cuff tears, biceps tendinitis, [shoulder instability](#), shoulder stiffness and several other causes.

"A systemic approach, and some experience, can help the clinician become more familiar with which constellation of findings in these athletes is not normal," Dr. Garbis and co-author Edward McFarland, MD, write.

Shoulder problems can begin during adolescence. Little League shoulder, an injury to the growth plate in the shoulder, is one of the most common. Adolescent pitchers most at risk for injuries are those who compete on traveling teams. Overuse injuries can lead to more serious mechanical injuries. Adhering to pitch counts should reduce injuries and decrease fatigue.

Treatment should be primarily nonsurgical. Nonsurgical options include icing the shoulder and judicious use of nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory medications such as ibuprofen and naproxen. Rehabilitation can restore a normal muscular balance. Rest can help, but it should not be prolonged, because the shoulder could become deconditioned.

If nonsurgical options fail, arthroscopic surgery can be considered. For example, surgical repair or trimming of partial rotator cuff tears can be highly successful, returning as many as 89 percent of college and professional pitchers back to play. However, the type of surgery needed depends upon the patient's [shoulder](#) problem.

Provided by Loyola University Health System

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