

## What is a Separated Shoulder?

- If you follow football or hockey closely, it is inevitable that you will hear of a player missing a game because of a separated shoulder. What does having a separated shoulder mean? Obviously, it does not mean that the player's shoulder has been removed from his or her body. It is also not the same thing as a dislocated shoulder where the ball of the shoulder (the humeral head) pops out of the socket.
- A "separated shoulder" is actually an injury to the acromioclavicular (AC) joint. This joint is located on the top of the shoulder where the acromion (a part of the shoulder blade) and the clavicle (the collarbone) come together. The acromion and clavicle are separated by a piece of cartilage similar to that of the meniscus in the knee. A pair of very strong ligaments stabilizes the a/c joint. These ligaments are the structures that are injured when an a/c separates. Their purpose is to anchor the collarbone to the shoulder. When these ligaments are injured the collarbone migrates toward the neck, creating a separation of the acromion from the clavicle or an AC separation.
- A separated shoulder commonly occurs from a direct blow to the shoulder. Most often the player falls onto his shoulder with his arm at his side. Falling in this manner transfers the majority of the energy of the fall to the AC joint.
- A shoulder separation is usually seen as a painful bump on the top of a player's shoulder in the area of AC joint. There are varying severities of this injury, depending upon the amount of injury sustained to the ligaments. The greater the ligament damage, the greater the separation of the joint. Often, minor injuries to the AC joint are treated with rest and physical therapy. Players with minor AC separations usually return to play quickly once their pain has subsided. It is not uncommon for these players to have a painless bump over their AC joint for the remainder of their career. Major injuries to the AC joint with dramatic separation may be more difficult to treat. Some players with this type of shoulder separation require reconstruction of the ligaments that hold the clavicle in place in order to prevent chronic pain and deformity of the a/c joint.
- Years after a shoulder separation, arthritis and pain may develop at the AC joint. If this occurs, the end of the clavicle that is involved may be removed. Thanks to new surgical innovations this can be done with an arthroscope and without the need for large surgical incisions.

Shoulder separations are common sports injuries, particularly in contact sports. As with any sports related injury, if you or someone you know suspects that they have sustained a shoulder separation, please seek medical attention.