

Acromioclavicular Joint Reconstruction

What is an acromioclavicular joint separation?

The acromioclavicular joint (AC joint) is where your collarbone (clavicle) connects to the shoulder blade (acromion/scapula) on the front of your shoulder. Multiple ligaments stabilize this joint. Injuries where you land on your shoulder can cause an injury to these ligaments. If the injury is severe enough then your shoulder and arm may droop relative to your clavicle, causing a bump on the shoulder, pain, difficulty with motion, and decreased strength.

How do you repair and AC joint separation?

Most of these injuries and separations can be treated without surgery. In some patients who have not improved with conservative management (without surgery) or have a very severe separation may benefit from surgery. An arthroscope (camera) is inserted into your shoulder to help repair your AC joint through small incisions. A slightly larger incision is made directly over your collarbone. The very end of your collarbone (~5 mm) is cut off to help prevent arthritis later in life. Using the camera inside your shoulder, a strong suture is passed through the clavicle and connected to the coracoid to reduce and fix your AC joint separation. An allograft tendon is also used to reinforce the repair by reconstructing the ligaments that connect your clavicle to the acromion (scapula) and clavicle to the coracoid.

How long does it take to recover from this surgery?

All patients recover at their own pace, and many factors affect recovery speed. Much of the recovery occurs during the first 3-6 months. Many people can return to normal activities and sports between 4-6 months after surgery.

Surgery Information

Length of Stay

This is a same-day procedure – meaning once the surgery is done and you have recovered in our recovery unit (PACU) then you will go home. You will need someone available to stay in the facility during the day of your surgery and drive you home afterwards.

Anesthesia

You will typically receive two types of anesthesia for this surgery.

- General anesthesia: meaning you are asleep during the procedure
- Nerve Block: the anesthesiologist will place medicine around the nerves that go to your arm. This will cause the arm to feel numb and not move. This block is very helpful for pain control after surgery and will last for about 12-24 hours.

Incisions and Dressings

You will have multiple small incisions around your shoulder closed with nylon suture (black suture) which will be removed as your first visit 2 weeks after surgery. The larger incision on top of your clavicle is closed with sutures underneath the skin which will dissolve on their own.

Your shoulder will be covered with a combination of gauze and tape. After three days you may remove this tape and gauze. The larger incision will have a white silk strip that is waterproof. At this point you can shower, letting soap and water run over the wounds closed with suture and the silk strip covering the other incision, patting them dry afterwards. You do not need to place a new dressing over top of the stitches, unless you would like to. Sometimes the stitches may snag on shirts, so you may find it more comfortable to place band-aids over the stitches to prevent this.

When showering, do not scrub the incision or dressings, just allow soap and water to run over the dressing/incision. Please do not submerge your incision under water for 4 weeks after surgery – no swimming pools, hot tubs, or baths. Do not apply any oils, ointments, or lotions to your incision or around your incisions.

Sling

When you wake up from surgery, a sling will be on your arm. This sling is very important to protect the repair on your shoulder. You will be in a sling full-time for 2 weeks and then 4 more weeks only when sleeping or out in public. You may remove the sling during the first two weeks for the following circumstances:

- Showering or changing clothes
- If you are relaxing on the couch – arm supported with pillows underneath the elbow
- When you are performing your home exercises or exercises with physical therapy

Is my sling in the correct position?

This is a very common question. The simple answer is if you can look down and see your elbow then your sling is in an appropriate position – whether that means your arm is at your side or arm is across your stomach. The sling is in a bad position if your elbow is behind your back and you cannot see your elbow. Otherwise, the sling is mainly for comfort so you may adjust the position as needed for comfort.

Pain Control

The first week or two is typically the worst. The swelling in your shoulder and hand is completely normal and will go away within the first week. Here are some helpful tips for pain control:

- Review my “Post-operative medication” information sheet I provided or on my website. I prescribe many different medications after surgery to help control your pain in different ways.
- Sleep: wear your sling and place a pillow behind your elbow while you sleep. Please sleep on your back. Many patients find sleeping in a reclined position is the most comfortable position – a recliner or propping your back up with pillows may be very helpful.

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- Ice: I strongly recommend ice after surgery. This will help with the pain and swelling after surgery. Apply for 20 minutes on and then 20 minutes off, repeat as needed. Ice-packs work just as well as an ice machine – and are significantly cheaper; however, many patients find the ice machine to be less hassle. Amazon and some medical supply stores supply these ice machines.

Post-operative Appointment

I will see you at roughly the following intervals after surgery: 2 weeks, 6 weeks, 3 months, and 6 months.

After your surgery, if you do not have a first post-operative visit appointment please call our office so we can schedule to see 2 weeks after surgery.

For any concerns, please contact my office

Please call my office if you begin to experience any of the following after surgery:

- Fever above 101.5 F
- Loss of motion or new onset numbness after surgery (your nerve block will be in place for approximately 24 hours after surgery)
- Excessive bleeding that is saturating the bandages
- Increased pain, increased redness around the incision, purulent drainage (thick, white drainage with a foul odor), or persistent drainage > 4 days.

Post-operative Rehab and Restrictions

Physical Therapy or Home Therapy

Your main goal after surgery is allowing the soft tissues to recover from the procedure by staying in the sling. During the first two weeks after surgery, please do the exercises listed in the document “Phase I – home exercise program”. This consists mainly of shoulder pendulum swings, ball squeezes, hand/wrist/elbow motion. You may come out of your sling when you are doing these exercises.

At your 2 week surgery visit, I will give you a physical therapy prescription or a home exercise routine if you would prefer to do your exercises at home without a therapist.

Restrictions after surgery

- Sling:
 - Full-time 2 weeks and then 4 more weeks only when sleeping or in public
- Motion restrictions:
 - Avoid reaching your hand up your back
 - Do not push yourself out of a chair or bed with your operative arm until 12 weeks after surgery
- Strengthening and weightlifting:
 - **No strengthening operative arm until 12 weeks after surgery**

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- Weightlifting restrictions: avoid bench press, Olympic lifts, and overhead press until 6 months post-op

Helpful resources during your recovery



Post-op Button or Magnetic shirts

You can find these shirts on amazon by searching “Post-op shoulder surgery shirts”. They have magnetic or button options that make it very easy to change your shirt without taking your sling off. They are typically ~\$15 per shirt.



Ice Machine

While ice packs are cheap and just as effective, many patients like to use ice machines after shoulder surgery as they are less hassle. These machines can be found in medical supply stores but Amazon will sell these for much cheaper (~\$100). Search “ice machine for shoulder surgery” to find multiple options.



Door Pulley

A door pulley is a very helpful way to work on range of motion exercises for your shoulder. Using the non-operative arm you can raise your operative arm without any effort (passive) or with some effort from your operative arm (active-assist). You can find these on Amazon by searching "Door Pulley for Shoulder Therapy".



Resistance Bands

Resistance bands are used in many of my home exercise routines for patients after around 3 months from surgery. You can find these on Amazon by searching "Theraband resistance bands". Keep the band resistance under ~5 pounds.