



January 16, 2012 – Grand Rapids, MI

## Protecting Your Rotator Cuff

Our daughter-in-law's mother recently had rotator cuff surgery and seems to have sailed through it; my brother-in-law has had surgery and Dad's had it on both shoulders. I've gotten a few questions recently about rotator cuff injuries, and I've noticed more people walking around in slings with the hand attached to the sling. It's interesting that four such small muscles would wreak so much havoc in so many people's lives.

The rotator cuff muscles start on the front and back of your scapula and attach to your humerus; they're the reason you can rotate your upper arm. Internal rotation, the action used in throwing a ball forward overhand, is controlled by three of the four rotator cuffs. External rotation moves the upper arm away from center. An example would be getting ready to throw a ball; the external rotator cuff moves the arm back.

We had a big, beautiful snowfall over the weekend here in West Michigan, and the air was full of the sounds of snowblowers. That's what prompted this message. When you start a snowblower or a lawn mower or boat motor—any action where you reach down and then pull back sharply—the rotator cuff is at risk if you pull incorrectly.

Don't pull with your arm; the arm and shoulder should be held steady, and the movement should be caused by the rotation of your upper body. Warm up by doing a few upper body rotations to get the correct movement set in your head. If you don't rotate and you pull with only the arm, you can tear a rotator cuff. That's how my father-in-law did it a couple of years ago. Now he leaves most of the snowblowing to me; there's an art to doing it just right that I actually enjoy.

When you've torn a rotator cuff, the only option is surgery. Physical therapy may help if it's not completely torn, but there's nothing else that will fully repair the rotator cuff. Of course, you could do what Paula recommends: buy a machine with electronic start and leave the resistance exercise to weight training.

What are you prepared to do today?

**Dr. Chet**

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