

What Is Bursitis?

Wherever your bones, tendons, and ligaments move against each other, particularly near joints, the points of contact are cushioned by small fluid-filled sacs called bursae. By reducing friction, each of the more than 150 bursae in your body helps the joints operate smoothly through the full range of natural movement. But when a bursa becomes irritated and swollen, it's called bursitis -- or inflammation of the bursa.

What Causes Bursitis?

When a joint is overused or injured suddenly, or when it remains under pressure for a long time, a nearby bursa can become inflamed. The sac fills with excess fluid, causing pressure on surrounding tissue. The immediate signal is pain, often accompanied by inflammation, swelling, and tenderness in the area. This is different from tendonitis, which is inflammation or irritation in the cord attaching muscle to bone, called a tendon.

Age plays a role in bursitis, and one of the most common places it strikes is in the shoulder, which has the greatest range of motion of all the body's major joints. The pain is generally felt along the outside top of the shoulder. The discomfort of bursitis tends to be most severe after a night's sleep and will typically subside somewhat with normal activity. **Other places that are prone to bursitis are the elbows, hips, knees, and the base of the thumb.**

Bursitis is associated with strenuous activity, particularly among the following types of people:

Athletes -- They may get bursitis after running, throwing, or jumping, or from making aggressive arm swings in tennis, baseball, gymnastics and even bowling.

Manual workers -- Heavy lifting, repetitive motion or working for extended periods can strain the joints and bring on a bursitis attack.

Otherwise-sedentary people -- If they push their bodies past reasonable limits, they risk bursitis. Bursitis/tendonitis is a common overuse injury in sports where the arm is used in an overhead motion (i.e., swimming, baseball). The pain is usually felt at the tip of the shoulder and referred down the deltoid muscle into the upper arm. It occurs when the arm is lifted overhead or twisted. Bursitis occurs when the bursa becomes inflamed and painful as surrounding muscles move over it.

How Do I Know If I Have It?

Your doctor will diagnose bursitis based on your symptoms, a physical exam, and the answers you give to questions about your medical history and activities that may have brought on the pain and swelling.

Some diagnostic tests may be performed to rule out other causes of your pain. These include the following:

- An X-ray of the affected area, to look for bony spurs (abnormal areas) or arthritis;
- Aspiration, in which fluid is taken from the swollen bursa and evaluated under a microscope, to rule out gout or infection;
- Blood tests to screen for conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis or diabetes.

A magnetic resonance imaging test (MRI) also may be performed to evaluate your condition.

What Are the Symptoms of Bursitis?

- Pain, inflammation, and swelling in the shoulders, elbows, hips, knees, or joints of the hands or feet, particularly during stretching or extension when exercising, lifting, or otherwise pushing the joint beyond its normal limits;
- Restricted range of motion in a joint, with or without immediate pain;
- Muscle weakness;
- Loss of motion, especially affecting the shoulder.

How Is It Treated?

Although bursitis generally disappears in a few days or weeks, you must take measures to avoid further strain or injury. A physical therapy program that includes stretching and focused strengthening exercises could be helpful.

Though you may be tempted to tough-out the pain, it's not a good idea. Left untreated, chronic bursitis can lead to the formation of calcium deposits in normally soft tissues, sometimes causing permanent reduction of motion in the affected joint.

Initial treatment typically consists of aspirin or other over-the-counter nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs). These pain relievers also tend to reduce inflammation. An injection of a local anesthetic mixed with one or more cortisone preparations into the bursa may be recommended to decrease inflammation and reduce pain. Heat and ultrasound can help relax the joint and promote tissue repair.

Diathermy (deep-heat therapy), under the direction of a sports physician, licensed physical therapist, or trainer, not only can relieve the discomfort and inflammation of bursitis but also can soothe tense muscles, nerves, and tendons. It may help to apply ice to the affected area for 20 to 30 minutes twice daily for two to three days.

Your doctor may prescribe physical therapy to strengthen the joint and prevent recurrence. Medication may also be prescribed including anti-inflammatory/analgesic medication to relieve pain. When you return to your sport, go back slowly. Warm up well and do range-of-motion exercises.

Bursitis may recur, particularly if you engage regularly in strenuous exercise or physical labor. In such cases, your doctor may prescribe corticosteroid treatment, in the form of either oral medication, topical creams, or injections to the affected

joints. In severe cases, it may be necessary to draw fluid from inflamed and swollen bursae with a needle to relieve the pressure. In persistent conditions, bursae can be surgically removed.

How Can I Prevent It?

Warming up before strenuous exercise and cooling down afterward is the most effective way to avoid bursitis and other strains affecting the bones, muscles and ligaments. Avoid activities that aggravate the problem. Rest the affected area after activity.

Call Your Doctor If:

- Pain in a joint persists more than a few days; you may be experiencing tendonitis, a strained ligament or tendon, or the onset of arthritis;
- You are unable to move the affected area;
- Swelling persists after taking a painkiller or anti-inflammatory agent as prescribed. You may need to have a doctor drain fluid from the affected joint, or you may need steroid injections into the joint to decrease inflammation.
- You have a fever with your bursitis symptoms.