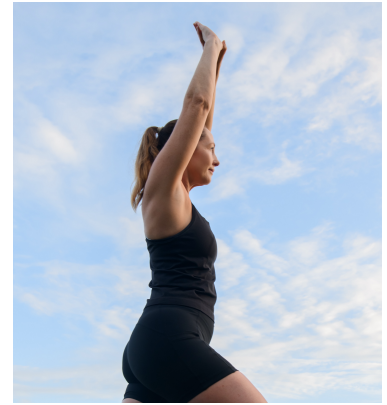


# Rotator cuff repair

Your 6-month recovery journey



## Critical to success

Rotator cuff repair requires strict adherence to movement restrictions for the first 6 weeks. This allows the tendon to heal to the bone. Rushing this phase can cause the repair to fail. Your patience now determines your long-term outcome.

## Surgery day

### Before surgery

- Arrive at least 2 hours before your scheduled surgery time
- Nurses will assist you to get changed and store your belongings
- My anaesthetist will discuss the anaesthetic plan — this may include a nerve block to numb your arm, in addition to a general anaesthetic
- Surgery typically takes 1–2 hours

### After surgery and on the ward

- You will wake up with bandages over your shoulder and your arm in a sling
- Your arm may be swollen — this is normal from the fluid used during keyhole surgery
- Fluid may leak from the keyhole wounds in the first 12–24 hours — this is normal and dressings can be changed before you go home
- Most patients spend one night on the ward
- A physiotherapist will show you exercises for your shoulder, elbow, hand, and wrist, and how to manage your sling

## Protection phase — weeks 0–6 (most critical phase)

**The repaired tendon needs 6 weeks to bond to the bone. Any active use of your arm can pull the repair apart. All movement during this phase must be passive.**

Sling must be worn at all times for 6 weeks, including while sleeping. Remove only for prescribed exercises and bathing (with assistance).

### Passive exercises only

- Neck, elbow, wrist, and hand exercises
- Postural awareness and shoulder blade mobility
- Passive movement within safe zones (physio-guided)
- Pendulum exercises — let gravity move your arm
- Thoracic spine mobility exercises
- Kinetic chain rehabilitation

### Absolute restrictions

- No active arm movement — do not lift your arm with your muscles
- No lifting anything (not even a cup of coffee)
- No driving
- No reaching, pushing, or pulling
- No washing hair or dressing with the operated arm

**You will need help with cooking, cleaning, dressing, bathing, and personal care for the full 6 weeks.**

## Early motion — weeks 6–8

### Wean from sling

Week 6 (under physio guidance)

#### Recovery goals

- Gradually wean out of sling
- Begin active-assisted exercises beyond safe zone
- Build confidence using your arm

#### What you can do

- Begin strengthening exercises
- Progress range of motion
- Very light activities (typing, eating)
- Attend physiotherapy regularly

#### Restrictions

- No lifting more than 1–2 kg
- No driving (until week 8)
- No reaching behind back

- Achieve 75–80% of normal range of motion

- No pushing, pulling, or active overhead reaching

## Active strengthening — weeks 8–12

<b>ROM 75–80% of normal</b>	Week 8
<b>Return to driving</b>	Week 8 (as able)
<b>Return to sedentary work</b>	Week 8

Recovery goals	What you can do	Restrictions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Progress to full active range of motion</li> <li>– Ascertain functional goals</li> <li>– Return to most daily activities</li> <li>– Return to driving and sedentary work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Early rotator cuff strengthening through range</li> <li>– Light household tasks (dishes, light cooking)</li> <li>– Computer and desk work</li> <li>– Driving once cleared</li> <li>– Independent dressing and personal care</li> <li>– Gentle swimming (no freestyle yet)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– No heavy lifting (nothing over 3–5 kg)</li> <li>– No overhead heavy lifting</li> <li>– No forceful pushing or pulling</li> <li>– No sports or recreational activities yet</li> </ul>

## Advanced strengthening — weeks 12–16 (3–4 months)

Recovery goals	What you can do	Restrictions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Patient-specific functional and sports training</li> <li>– Manual therapy to address movement deficits</li> <li>– Progressive resistance exercises</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Resistance band and light dumbbell exercises</li> <li>– Full rotator cuff strengthening program</li> <li>– Scapular stabilisation exercises</li> <li>– Most household chores</li> <li>– Light gardening</li> <li>– Swimming all strokes</li> <li>– Return to work (most occupations)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– No overhead heavy lifting (max 5–10 kg)</li> <li>– No contact sports</li> <li>– No throwing activities</li> <li>– No tennis, golf, or racquet sports yet</li> </ul>

## Return to full activity — months 3–6

<b>Full ROM</b>	3–6 months
<b>Return to swimming, golf, lifting</b>	3–6 months
<b>Return to manual work</b>	3–6 months (as guided)

Recovery goals	What you can do	Ongoing precautions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Return to desired recreational activities</li> <li>– Return to work including manual labour</li> <li>– Build endurance for sustained activities</li> <li>– Achieve good functional strength</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Progressive gym-based strengthening</li> <li>– Overhead lifting with moderate weights</li> <li>– Golf, tennis (gradual progression)</li> <li>– Swimming including freestyle</li> <li>– Recreational cycling</li> <li>– Light to moderate manual work</li> <li>– Most household and yard work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Avoid heavy overhead lifting (&gt;10–15 kg)</li> <li>– No competitive contact sports initially</li> <li>– Gradually build up to demanding activities</li> <li>– Listen to your shoulder — pain is a warning sign</li> </ul>

## Full recovery and beyond — 6+ months

### Long-term outlook

- Continued strength gains up to 12 months
- Most patients achieve good pain relief
- Return to desired activities and work
- Better strength and function than pre-surgery

### Success factors

- Size of tear matters — smaller tears heal more predictably
- Compliance is critical — the first 6 weeks determine success
- Physiotherapy is essential — recovery takes dedication

### Lifelong maintenance

- Continue rotator cuff strengthening exercises
- Maintain shoulder flexibility
- Regular exercise and activity
- Address any pain or symptoms early

## Key milestones at a glance

<b>Week 6</b>	Wean from sling
<b>Week 8</b>	Sling discarded — ROM 75–80% of normal, return to driving, return to sedentary work
<b>3–6 months</b>	Full ROM — return to swimming, golf, lifting, and manual work (as guided)
<b>6 months</b>	Unrestricted activity

### When to contact your surgeon — call immediately if you experience:

- Fever above 38°C
- Wound redness, warmth, pus, or foul smell
- Severe pain not controlled by prescribed medication
- New numbness, tingling, or weakness in your arm or hand
- Wound opening or excessive drainage
- Sudden loss of shoulder function

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After hours: Contact the Emergency Department at the hospital where your surgery was performed.