

SHOULDER

Shoulder Tendon Transfer

A shoulder tendon transfer is a type of surgery that involves moving (transferring) a tendon from one part of the body to another to restore function in the shoulder. It is typically done when the rotator cuff tendons — which help stabilize and move the shoulder — are severely damaged or torn, and other treatments like physical therapy or injections haven't worked. A tendon from a different muscle is relocated and reattached to take over the function of the damaged tendon, with the goal of improving strength and restoring shoulder movement.

Why it might be recommended

- Severe rotator cuff tears that cannot be repaired
- Shoulder instability, often due to weakness or injury of the rotator cuff
- Weakness in the shoulder muscles affecting the ability to lift the arm or perform daily tasks

This surgery is often used when a rotator cuff repair isn't possible, or when the shoulder's muscle balance needs to be restored to improve function.

How it works

1. The surgeon identifies a healthy donor tendon from another muscle around the shoulder or upper arm that can compensate for the damaged tendon. 2. The chosen tendon is carefully moved to a new position where it can perform the function of the damaged tendon, and reattached to the bone. 3. Recovery follows, with a rehabilitation program including physical therapy to help you regain strength and range of motion. Recovery typically takes several months.

Tendons commonly used for transfer

- Latissimus dorsi tendon — a large muscle in the back, often used for severe rotator cuff damage
- Pectoralis major tendon — the large chest muscle, used in specific situations
- Trapezius tendon — used in certain cases depending on the individual's condition

Recovery after tendon transfer

- Post-surgery care: a sling for several weeks to protect the shoulder, with expected swelling and prescribed pain medication as needed
- Physical therapy: once the tendon has healed, therapy begins to restore strength and motion — a critical part of the tendon transfer's success
- Gradual return to activities: full recovery may take four to six months or longer, depending on your specific situation and how closely you follow your therapy program

Risks and benefits

Benefits include restoring shoulder function when other treatments haven't worked, improved strength and stability, and a return to daily activities or light sports. As with any surgery, risks include infection, nerve damage, or the tendon not functioning as intended — rehabilitation is key to the success of the transfer.

When it's used

Chronic shoulder instability that can't be treated with other methods, severe rotator cuff injuries where the tendon cannot be repaired, and loss of shoulder function after trauma or long-term injury.

Key takeaway

Shoulder tendon transfer can be a highly effective way to restore shoulder strength and function, but recovery requires patience and dedicated rehabilitation. It's an option when other treatments have failed, and it helps many patients return to an active lifestyle.