


# Rotator Cuff Problems: Exercises You Can Do at Home

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## Rotator Cuff Problems: Exercises You Can Do at Home

Exercises are a very important part of treatment for a rotator cuff disorder. If pain, weakness, and stiffness in your shoulder (See figure in appendix) are related to problems with your rotator cuff, a doctor will usually first recommend nonsurgical treatment. Exercises, combined with periods of rest, ice, and heat and taking nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), resolve most rotator cuff problems. If the pain in or function of your shoulder does not improve with these methods, surgery or other treatment may be considered.

You need to avoid certain motions and everyday activities that make your problems worse, such as reaching into the backseat of your car or stretches that pull your arms toward your back. Be careful when you begin your exercises. Slow down or stop the activity if needed.

Exercises also play a role when your rotator cuff is treated surgically. You will work with your doctor and physical therapist to plan an exercise program that helps you regain as much strength and

flexibility in your shoulder as possible.



How do I exercise for rotator cuff disorders?



## How do I exercise for rotator cuff disorders?

Before you start these exercises, talk with your doctor or physical therapist. It is important to be consistent and do the exercises as directed.

But stop exercising and call your health professional if you are not sure you are doing them correctly or if you have any pain. Any discomfort you feel during exercise should not last more than 2 hours after you finish. And pain should not wake you up at night.

Clicking and popping during exercise are not necessarily cause for concern. But a grinding sensation may point to another problem.

If your shoulder is sore after you exercise, ice it.

### Stretching exercises

If you have had surgery to repair a rotator cuff tear, you will not usually begin any active exercises until at least 3 to 6 weeks after surgery. Active exercise might be allowed right away after surgery for tendinitis. Be sure to follow your surgeon's advice on when exactly these exercises are appropriate. Also, most people wear an immobilizing sling or shoulder brace after surgery. You will need to ask your doctor about getting help taking it off before you exercise and replacing it at the end of the session. A friend, family member, or physical therapist may be able to help you if your doctor approves.

You should master the stretching exercises and be able to put your shoulder through its full range of motion before you begin strengthening routines. Do the stretching exercises 5 to 10 times a day.

The list below links to specific stretching exercises with pictures and instructions. The pendulum swing (See figure in appendix) is a good exercise to start with.

- Overhead stretch (See figure in appendix)
- Posterior stretching (See figure in appendix)
- Up-the-back stretch (See figure in appendix)
- Wall climbing to the side (See figure in appendix)
- Wall climbing to the front (See figure in appendix)

### Strengthening exercises

Start strengthening exercises only after you have your doctor's approval. Usually these exercises are started gradually as soon as you can do the stretching routine without pain. But these and other similar exercises usually should not be done until at least 6 to 8 weeks after surgery.

For any strengthening exercises where your arms start at or stretch from your sides, the motion

should be on a diagonal about 30 degrees to the front of where your arms would make a T when raised 90 degrees to the side.

The list below links to specific strengthening exercises with pictures and instructions.

- Arm raises to the side (See figure in appendix)
- External rotator (See figure in appendix)
- Internal rotator (See figure in appendix)
- Shoulder flexor and extensor (See figure in appendix)

## Scapular strengthening exercises

The shoulder blade (scapula) is one of the main bones of the shoulder joint. It stabilizes the shoulder from the back side. If the scapula doesn't move well, it puts a lot of pressure on the rotator cuff and related muscles, which can cause strain. Also, if the scapula is not moving properly, there is an increased risk of impingement in the subacromial space.

Scapular exercises can help you keep or improve strength around the shoulder blade to help with rotator cuff function.

The list below links to specific scapular strengthening exercises with pictures and instructions.

- Scapula protraction with arm reach (See figure in appendix)
- Scapula protraction with wall push-ups (See figure in appendix)
- Scapula retraction (See figure in appendix)

## Credits for Rotator Cuff Problems: Exercises You Can Do at Home

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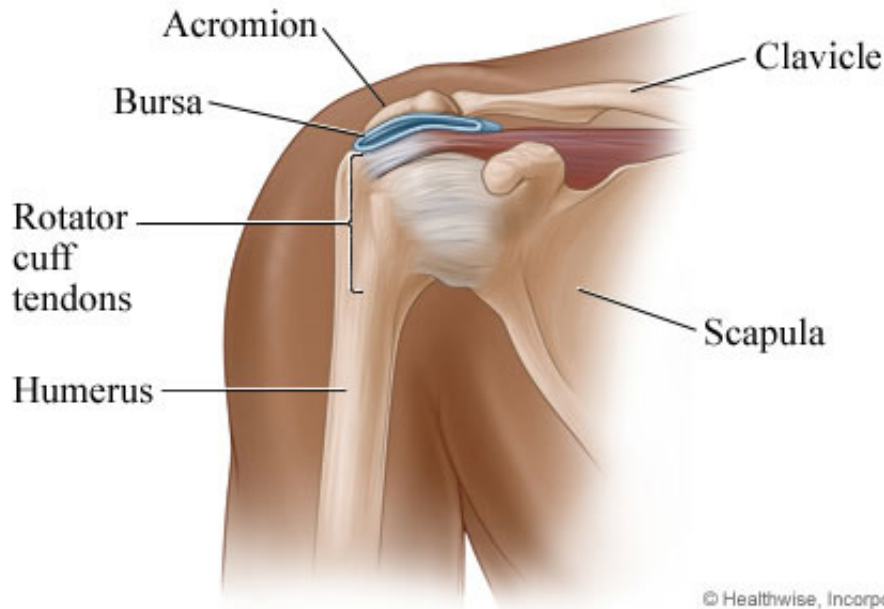
## Appendix

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## Topic Images

Figure

**Shoulder**



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The shoulder is made up of three bones: the scapula (shoulder blade), the humerus (upper arm bone), and the clavicle (collarbone). Muscles, tendons, and ligaments hold it together. The outer end of the collarbone is connected to the end (acromion) of the shoulder blade. The bursa is a fluid-filled sac that cushions and lubricates the shoulder area. The rotator cuff is the group of tendons and their related muscles that help keep the upper arm bone seated in the socket of the shoulder blade.

Figure

## Pendulum-Swing Exercise for the Shoulder



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If you have pain in your back, do not do this exercise.

- While holding onto a table or the back of a chair with your good arm, bend forward a little and let your injured arm hang straight down.
- This exercise does not use the arm muscles. Rather, use your legs and your hips to create movement that makes your arm swing freely.
- Using the momentum from your hips and legs, guide the slightly swinging arm back and forth like a pendulum (or elephant trunk), then in circles that start small (about the size of a dinner plate) and gradually grow larger each day as pain allows.
- Do this exercise for 5 minutes, 5 to 7 times each day even while your shoulder is still tender from an injury or surgery.
- As you have less pain, try bending over a little farther to do this exercise. This will increase the amount of movement at your shoulder.

## Figure

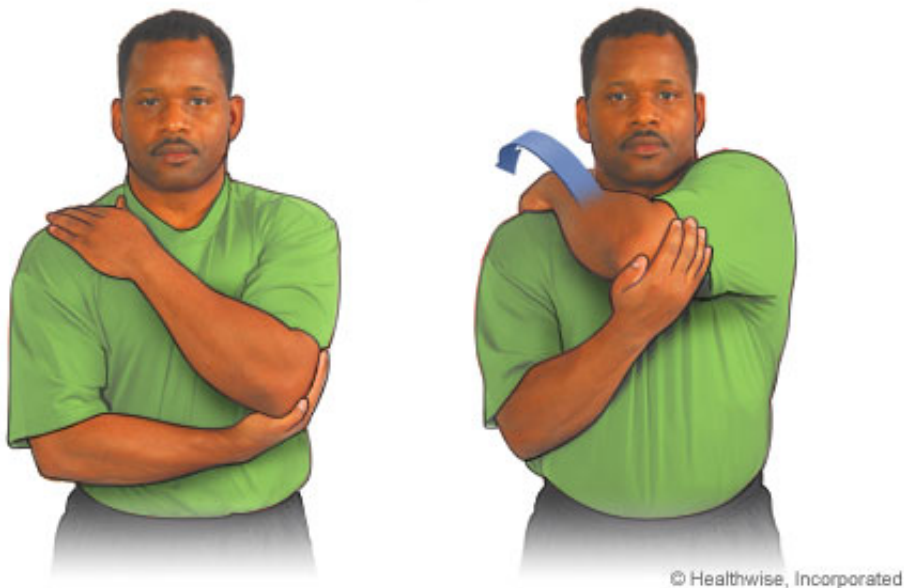
### Overhead Stretch for the Shoulders



- Standing about an arm's length away, grasp on to a solid surface, such as a countertop, a doorknob, or the back of a sturdy chair.
- With your knees slightly bent, bend forward with your arms straight, lowering your upper body and letting your shoulders stretch.
- As your shoulders are able to stretch farther, you may need to take a step or two backward.
- Hold for at least 15 to 30 seconds then stand up and relax. If you had stepped back during your stretch, step forward so you can keep your hands on the solid surface.
- Repeat 2 to 4 times.

Figure

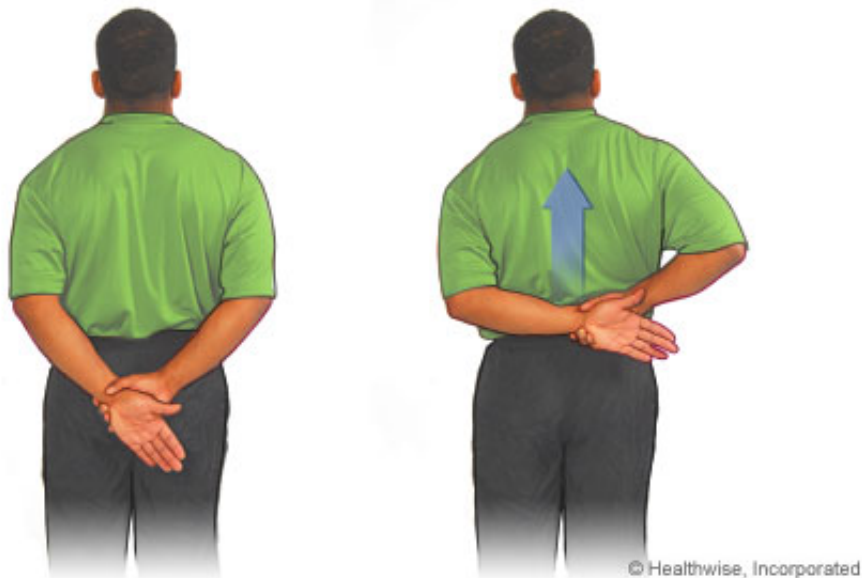
## Posterior Stretching Exercise for the Shoulder



- Hold the elbow of your injured arm with your opposite hand.
- Use your hand to pull your injured arm gently up and across your body. You will feel a gentle stretch across the back of your injured shoulder.
- Hold for at least 15 to 30 seconds, then slowly lower your arm.
- Repeat 2 to 4 times.

Figure

## Up-the-Back Stretch for the Shoulder

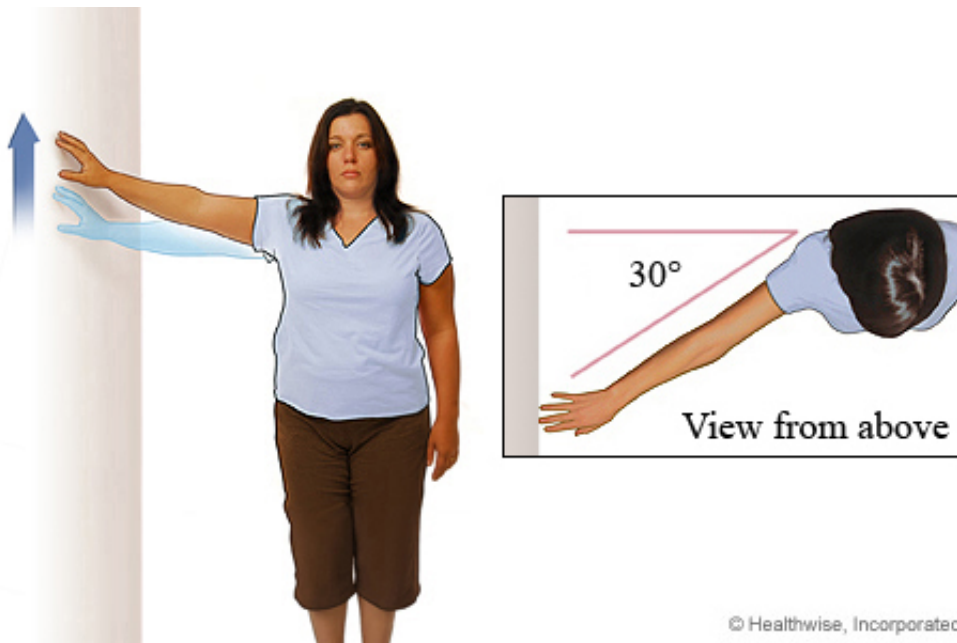


Your doctor or physical therapist may advise you to wait to do this stretch until you have regained most of your range of motion and strength. You can do this stretch in different ways. Hold any of these stretches for at least 15 to 30 seconds, and repeat 2 to 4 times.

- Put your hand in your back pocket, and let it rest there to stretch your shoulder.
- With your opposite hand, hold your affected arm (palm outward) behind your back by the wrist. Pull your arm up gently to stretch your shoulder.
- To progress, put a towel over your opposite shoulder. Put the hand of your injured arm behind your back and hold the back end of the towel. With the other hand, hold the front end of the towel in front of your body. Pull gently on the front end of the towel to gently bring your hand farther up your back to stretch your shoulder.

Figure

### Shoulder Exercise: Wall Climbing to the Side



Avoid any movement that is straight to your side, and be careful not to arch your back. Your arm should stay about 30 degrees to the front of your side.

- Stand with your side to a wall so that your fingers can just touch it at an angle about 30 degrees toward the front of your body.
- Walk the fingers of your injured arm up the wall as high as pain permits. Try not to shrug your shoulder up toward your ear as you move your arm up.
- Hold that position for a count of at least 15 to 20.
- Walk your fingers back down to the starting position.
- Repeat at least 2 to 4 times, trying to reach higher each time.



Figure

## Shoulder Exercise: Wall-Climbing to the Front



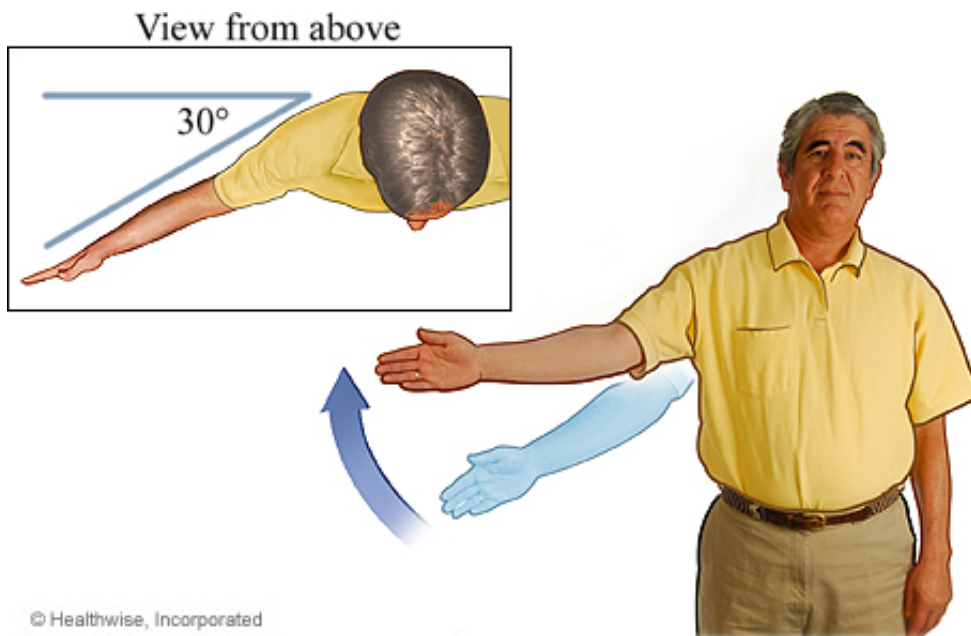
During this stretching exercise, be careful not to arch your back.

- Face a wall, standing so your fingers can just touch it.
- Keeping your shoulder down (don't shrug up toward your ear), walk the fingers of your injured arm up the wall as high as pain permits.
- Hold that position for at least 15 to 30 seconds.
- Slowly walk your fingers back down to the starting position.
- Repeat at least 2 to 4 times, trying to reach higher each time.

Figure

## Arm Raise to the Side



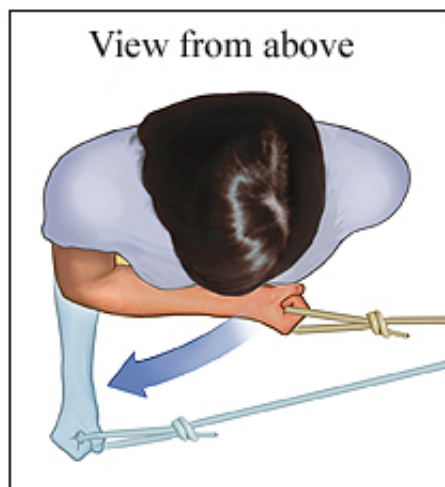


During this strengthening exercise your arm should stay about 30 degrees to the front of your side.

- Slowly raise your injured arm to the side, with your thumb facing up. Raise your arm 60 degrees at the most (shoulder level is 90 degrees).
- After holding the position for 3 to 5 seconds, lower your arm back to your side. If you need to, bring your "good" arm across your body and place it under the elbow as you lower your injured arm. Use your good arm to keep your injured arm from dropping down too fast during the downward motion.
- Repeat 8 to 12 times.
- When you first start out, don't hold any additional weight in your hand. As your strength improves, you may use a 1 lb to 2 lb (0.5 kg to 1 kg) dumbbell or a small can of food.

Figure

## External Rotator Strengthening Exercise



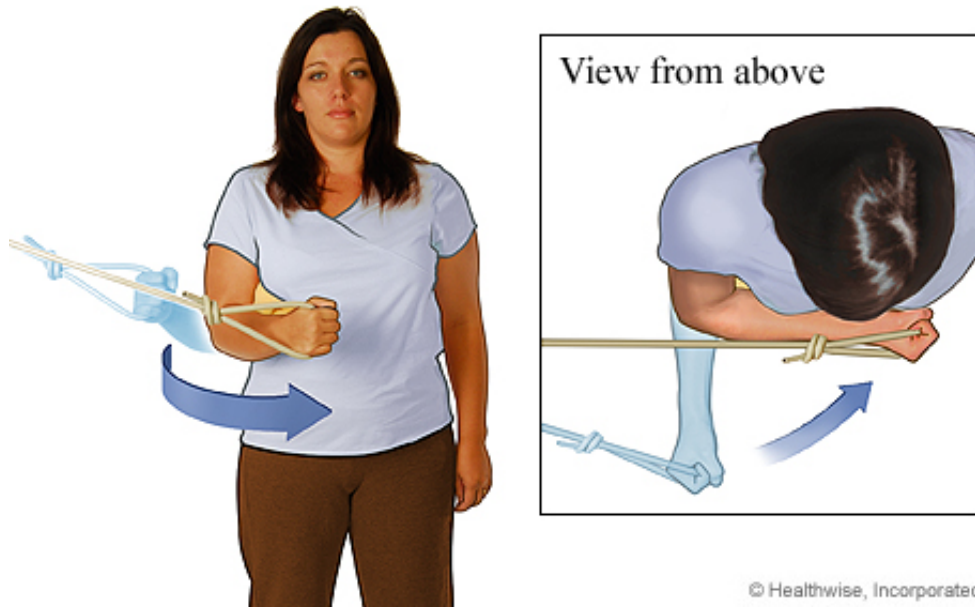
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- Begin by tying a piece of elastic exercise material, such as surgical tubing or Thera-Band, to a doorknob. (You may also hold one end of the band in each hand.)
- Stand or sit with your shoulder relaxed and your elbow bent 90 degrees. Your upper arm should rest comfortably against your side. You can squeeze a rolled towel between your elbow and your body for comfort and to help keep your arm at your side.
- Hold one end of the elastic band with the hand of the affected arm.
- Start this exercise with your forearm across your belly. Slowly rotate the forearm out away from your body, keeping your elbow and upper arm tucked against the towel roll or the side of your body until you begin to feel tightness in your shoulder. Slowly move your arm back to where you started.
- Repeat 8 to 12 times.

Figure

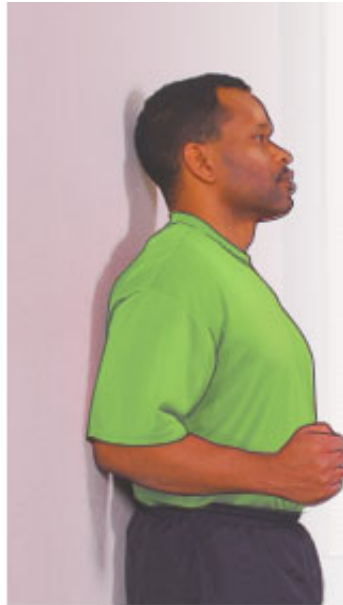
## Internal Rotator Strengthening Exercise



- Begin by tying a piece of elastic exercise material, such as surgical tubing or Thera-Band, to a doorknob.
- Stand or sit with your shoulder relaxed and your elbow bent 90 degrees. Your upper arm should rest comfortably against your side. You can squeeze a rolled towel between your elbow and your body for comfort and to help keep your arm at your side.
- Hold one end of the elastic band in the hand of the affected arm.
- Slowly rotate your forearm toward your body until it touches your belly. Slowly move it back to where you started.
- Keep your elbow and upper arm firmly tucked against the towel roll or the side of your body during this movement.
- Repeat 8 to 12 times.

Figure

## Shoulder Flexor and Extensor Exercises



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These are isometric exercises. That means you contract your muscles without actually moving.

- **Push forward (flex):** Stand facing a wall or doorjamb, about 6 in. (15.2 cm) or less back. Hold your affected arm against your body. Make a closed fist with your thumb on top and gently push your hand forward into the wall with about 25% to 50% of your strength. Don't let your body move backward as you push. Hold for 5 seconds. Repeat 8 to 12 times.
- **Push backward (extend):** Stand with your back flat against a wall. Your upper arm should be against the wall, with your elbow bent 90 degrees (your hand straight ahead). Push your elbow gently back against the wall with about 25% to 50% of your strength. Don't let your body move forward as you push. Hold for 5 seconds. Repeat 8 to 12 times.

Figure

## Scapular Exercise: Arm Reach



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- Lie flat on your back. This exercise is a very slight motion that starts with your arms raised (elbows straight, arms straight).
- From this position, reach higher toward the sky or ceiling, keeping your elbows straight. All motion should be from your shoulder blade only.
- Relax back to the starting position.
- Repeat 8 to 12 times.

Figure

## Scapular Exercise: Wall Push-Ups



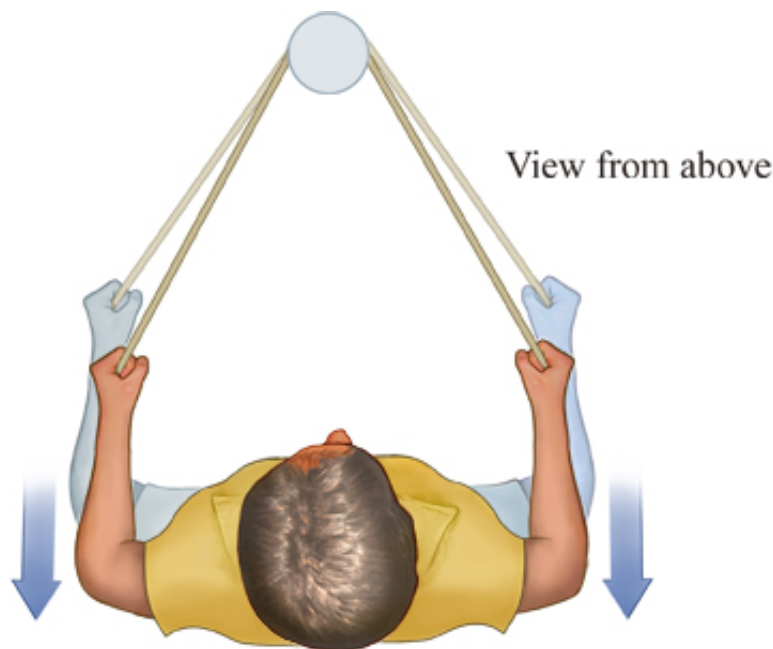
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This exercise is best done with your fingers moderately turned out, rather than straight up and down.

- Stand facing a wall, about 12 in. to 18 in. (30 cm to 45 cm) away.
- Place your hands on the wall at shoulder height.
- Slowly bend your elbows and bring your face to the wall, keeping your back and hips straight.
- Push back to the starting position.
- Repeat 8 to 12 times.
- When you can do this exercise against a wall comfortably, you can try it against a counter. You can then slowly progress to the end of a couch, then to a sturdy chair, and finally to the floor.

**Figure**

**Scapular Exercise: Retraction**



For this exercise, you will need elastic exercise material, such as surgical tubing or Thera-Band.

- Put the band around a solid object, such as a bedpost, at about waist level. Each hand should hold an end of the band.
- With your elbows at your sides and bent to 90 degrees, pull the band back to move your shoulder blades toward each other. Return to the starting position.
- Repeat 8 to 12 times.
- If you have good range of motion in your shoulders, try this exercise with your arms lifted out to the sides, with your elbows at a 90-degree angle. Raise the elastic band up to about shoulder level. Pull the band back to move your shoulder blades toward each other. Return to the starting position.



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