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CLINICAL PEARL

Rotator Cuff Pain and Sleepless Nights

It isn't bad enough that rotator cuff inflammation and related disorder are annoying and painful but when they cause you to lose sleep, that's a double whammy!



As you may remember from your anatomy, there is a "critical zone" in the rotator cuff that gets a relatively delicate blood supply via the anastomosis of the muscular vessels (Suprascapular and Subscapular arteries) with the osseous vessels of the Anterior Humeral Circumflex artery. With time and the irritation / abuse of the cuff (aka life), a chalky bone paste forms and hardens (calcification) in the midst of the vascular network. This calcification, as it turns out, will compromise blood flow to the cuff's "Critical Zone" if immobilized with the arm in anatomical position -- adducted up against the body. This blood supply is often compromised even though there are no other outward signs of RTC disease.

Complicating / contributing factors are; age, previous tears and damage to the cuff, ACJ arthritis, bone spurs, thickened tendons, scar tissue, poor posture and muscle imbalances in and around the upper quadrant.

The patient complains of shoulder pain at night that wakes them up and may or may not have pain at any other time. Poor sleep can lead to a host of other maladies that cannot help the situation so . . . What Do You Do?????

No matter what you come up with on your assessment / eval, you want to make suggestions that help the patient right away; even that night if possible. So, I always tell my shoulder patients to do the following:

Fold up a pillow and place it high in the axilla of the affected side when they go to bed. This serves several vital functions.

1. Prevents them from rolling onto the painful shoulder which would wake them up.

2. Keeps the shoulder in slight abduction which almost instantly improves circulation stopping the ischemic pain which wakes them up.

Even if they get pain while lying on the non-affected side because the affected shoulder is in adduction against the body, the pillow keeps the blood flowing better through the Critical Zone of the RTC.

So not only do you give them pain relief at night, you get them a better night sleep AND improve healing / blood flow through the rotator cuff.

Try it the next time you get a shoulder patient who wakes up with pain at night.

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