Delayed Postoperative Physical Therapy Management Following Rotator Cuff Repair: A Case Report

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The subject of this case report gave oral and written consent for the presentation of this report. Case reports are a report of normal clinical practice and do not require IRB approval.

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Background and Purpose: Post-surgical rehabilitation protocols have varied among providers with length and type of immobilization, onset of physical therapy and timing of progression. Due to the risk of postoperative stiffness, many advocate for early mobilization; however, stiffness may be an easier complication to overcome than a recurrent cuff tear if the rehabilitation is too aggressive. The purpose of this case report is to describe the post-surgical management of arthroscopic rotator cuff repair with prolonged immobilization and delayed physical therapy intervention.

Case Description: The patient, a 50 year old male, presented in physical therapy at six weeks s/p right rotator cuff repair of the supraspinatus and sub acromial decompression. He was referred for “ROM, strengthening and home program.” Interventions included PROM progressed to AROM, strengthening of RC and surrounding musculature, modalities for pain control and dynamic scapulothoracic stability exercises.

Outcomes: At nine weeks post-op, the patient demonstrated substantial improvements in right shoulder range of motion, having gained back 80% functional range of motion. He improved his shoulder strength, achieving MMT scores of 4+/5 and 5/5. He also reported 0-3/10 pain consistently at rest and during mild activity, and had a significant improvement in QuickDASH score. The patient met our pain goal of mild pain (1-3/10) with iADLs and no pain during work activity; however, the patient was unable to perform recreational activities at the time of his last visit.

Conclusion: There is continued controversy regarding the optimal time to start physical therapy post rotator cuff repair. This case report demonstrated a conservative therapeutic approach for a patient s/p rotator cuff repair. The patient was able to gain 80% of his shoulder motion with mild to no pain during daily use of his shoulder within nine weeks of physical therapy. He planned to continue on with physical therapy for six weeks to further accomplish his physical therapy goals and restore normal function in his shoulder.