Painful shoulder

How does the shoulder work?
The shoulder is the most mobile joint in the body. It is described as a ball and socket joint and is commonly affected by painful problems which limit its movement. The joint is surrounded by a fibrous capsule and a group of four muscles called the rotator cuff which are very important for controlling the movement of the shoulder.

Where is the pain coming from?
Shoulder problems may be part of a general condition such as rheumatoid arthritis and osteoarthritis or a more localised problem. Occasionally, the neck may be the cause of the pain felt into the shoulder or even into the arm. This is known as referred pain.

There are numerous reasons for shoulder pain, some examples include:
• problems with the pattern of shoulder movement
• problems with your posture
• inflammation or strain to the muscles and tendons
• inflammation in the sac of soft tissue (bursa) which normally allows muscles and tendons to slide smoothly over bone
• changes to bones/cartilage which can be caused by arthritis
• referred pain

What can I do?
If you have had a direct injury to the shoulder as a result of a fall or trauma, it is wise to consult your GP. If there has been no clear injury you may want to try and help yourself by following the advice below.

**Painkillers**
Simple painkillers and creams may be helpful, however you should not use these for more than two weeks. Ask your pharmacist or GP before taking any medication to make sure it is suitable for you.

**Heat/Ice**
You may find an ice pack useful if your shoulder is inflamed (hot to touch and red). Wrap the ice pack in a damp towel and leave it on for 10 minutes, checking your skin regularly.
If your shoulder feels stiff to move you may prefer a heat pack or a hot water bottle wrapped in a small towel for 10 minutes. Do not use boiling water as it will burn the skin.

**Rest and exercise**
You should aim for a balance between rest and activity to prevent the shoulder from becoming stiff.

Good exercises to try are:

1. **Pendulum exercise**

   Stand leaning forward over table or chair. Gently swing your arm backwards and forwards, from side to side and in small circles.
2. Arm over head

Lie on your back. Use your unaffected arm to assist the painful arm overhead. Hold gently at the first point of pulling for 20 seconds.

Try these exercises 5 times each 2-3 times a day.

Modify your activities
• Try to avoid movements that are most painful
• When reaching up keep your palm facing the ceiling
• When lifting keep your elbow bent and close to your body

Posture
It can be tempting to sit with your arm held tightly at your side; this position can make the pain worse and lead to the arm becoming stiff.
When sitting try to support your arm on a cushion placed on your lap.
If your shoulder is painful to lie on try:
• lying on your better side; use a rolled up pillow in front of your body to support your painful arm
• if you sleep on your back place one or two pillows under your painful arm to support it

Reducing the strain
Carry out your normal activities as best as you can but do not push into the pain. You may need to pace yourself to start with and try to do a bit more each day.
At home:
  - when vacuuming, keep your upper body upright
  - only iron essential items
  - avoid heavy lifting and use a trolley when out shopping.

At work:
  - try to maintain good posture by not slumping in your chair
  - avoid overhead activities if lifting your arm is painful

What if the pain continues?
If the problem continues for more than a few weeks or gets worse you should see your doctor.

Physiotherapy
You may benefit from a physiotherapy assessment if the advice given in this leaflet has not changed your symptoms.

If any of the exercises or advice in this leaflet causes your symptoms to worsen please stop the activity and seek advice