

St. George's Shoulder Unit

Patient Information

REPAIR OF RUPTURE OF THE LONG HEAD OF BICEPS

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This information booklet has been produced to help you obtain the maximum benefit from your operation. It is not a substitute for professional medical care and should be used in association with treatment at the orthopaedic clinic. Individual variations requiring specific instructions not mentioned here may be required.

If your wound changes appearance, weeps fluid or pus, or you feel unwell with a high temperature, during office hours please contact our PA. Alternatively contact the hospital where you had your operation in the first instance.

Who to contact if you are worried or require further information.
PA at St. George's Hospital: 0208 725 2032
SWLEOC: 01372 735800

What happens LHB rupture

The biceps is the muscle at the front of the arm which bends the elbow. It has 2 sites of attachment at the shoulder. The short head attaches to a small bone, the coracoid, just beside the joint and the long head runs over the top of the humerus, into the joint itself and attaches to the top of the glenoid.

The attachment of this tendon can become damaged or, in some cases, can tear completely. Most people notice only that the muscle looks odd when they bend the arm. It appears that it has “slipped”. This is known as the “popeye sign”. In the majority of cases it is only a cosmetic deformity however some people describe weakness and early fatigue. This is usually the younger, more physical patients.

Treatment Options

The initial treatment is conservative. The doctor may suggest that you rest and avoid overhead activities. A period of physiotherapy may help to re-strengthen the muscle. Treatment may take several weeks to months. Many patients experience a gradual improvement and return to function.

When conservative treatment does not produce satisfactory results, surgery may be recommended to remove the early fatiguing and pain that is sometimes experienced.

Purpose of the operation

To reattach the ruptured long head of the biceps tendon to reduce pain and fatiguing.

The procedure

The operation requires a general anaesthetic

An injection into the side of the neck called a scalene block is usually done to help with postoperative pain. This has risks associated with it which the anaesthetist will explain to you.

2 incisions will be made in the shoulder, one at the back and one at the front. Each is less than 1cm long. The arthroscope will be introduced into the joint via these incisions so that the joint can be inspected and cleaned up if necessary. A further 5cm incision will be made in the armpit to reattach the tendon.

The incisions will be closed with paper stitches “Steristrips” with a small dressing over the top. A nappy (Pampers, Huggies) will be applied over the top to soak up excess fluid from the surgery (arthroscopy uses a lot of water to irrigate the joint during the procedure).

A sling will be applied before you wake up. This is to support the tendon while it heals but may be removed early for gentle exercises..

As result of the scalene block the arm will be numb and “dead” for up to six hours after surgery. This is entirely normal and most people go home with the arm still numb as it makes travel easier. As soon as you feel any pain you should start the painkillers you have been prescribed.

Risks

All surgical procedures have some element of risk attached. The risks outlined below are the most common or most significant that have been reported.

Continued pain / weakness: 5%

In the majority of cases all the pain is removed by surgery however occasionally a small amount of pain persists. This is usually mild but very rarely (less than 1%) can be the same or worse than prior to surgery.

Infection: less than 0.1%

If an infection does occur it is usually superficial in the wounds and is easily treated with antibiotics

Rarely the infection can be deep inside the joint and this requires surgery to wash the joint out.

Nerve damage: less than 0.1%

The axillary nerve runs close to the bottom of the joint and, if damaged causes weakness of the deltoid muscle and difficulty in raising the arm.

Stiffness: 1%

The shoulder will often become stiff after surgery and this usually settles with physiotherapy. Rarely the shoulder can become very stiff and require manipulation or arthroscopic release surgery.

What is going to happen?

The day of surgery

You will be asked not to eat or drink anything for 6 hours prior to surgery.

You will be admitted to the hospital a couple of hours before the operation and the nurse will ensure that you are fit and prepared. The surgeon will go over the operation again with you and ask you to sign a consent form (see above for consent). The arm to be operated on will then be marked with an indelible marker.

The anaesthetist will then come and discuss the anaesthetic.

When it is time for surgery you will be taken on the trolley round to the operating theatre.

After the surgery you will be taken to a recovery ward where the nurses will observe you while you wake up from the anaesthetic. Once you are fully awake you will be taken back to the ward. As soon as you feel comfortable you may go home. You will need to have an adult with you at home as you will still be slightly under the effect of the anesthetic even if you feel fine.

1st Postop week

Leave the dressings alone

You may shower but do not soak the dressings Start gentle motion as pain allows.

Start the exercises as described on the separate sheet

Frequently asked Questions

When can I shower?

Immediately after the surgery

When will I be seen in clinic after the operation?

You will be seen at 3 weeks post surgery. Later appointments will be determined by your progress

How long do I have to wear the sling for?

You need to wear it most of the time for 4 weeks while the tendon heals. You may remove it during this time for desk based activities but you must not lift or carry

When can I drive?

As soon as you feel comfortable. This is usually 4-6 weeks

When can I return to sports?

Most people are able to return to light sports at about 4 weeks. More intense activity (contact sports, weightlifting) may take 6 weeks or more

When can I return to work?

Is the job physical?

Does the job require the operated arm?

Do I drive to get to work?

As a general rule if you can get to work you can resume a sedentary job within the week. Physical jobs will require at least 6-8 weeks.

How will I know if the operation has worked?

It often takes 3 months or more before all of the pain has settled