

POST-OPERATIVE REHABILITATION PROTOCOL

Rotator Cuff Repair — Small Tear

William McLaughlin, MD | Sports Medicine Surgery | Advanced Bone & Joint

Phase 1 | 1-4 Weeks

GOALS FOR THIS PHASE

- Sling immobilization.
- Maintain elbow, wrist, and hand active ROM.
- True passive (only) shoulder ROM — NO active motion.
- Goal supine elevation in scapular plane 140°; emphasize ER (minimum 40°).
- Begin scapular stabilization and submaximal deltoid isometrics as ROM improves.
- No pulley/canes until 5 weeks post-op.

Immobilization

- Sling immobilization.

Range of Motion

- Active ROM exercises to the elbow, wrist, and hand.
- True passive (ONLY) ROM shoulder — NO active motion.
- Pendulums.
- Supine elevation in scapular plane to 140°.
- External rotation to tolerance with arm at side (emphasize ER, minimum goal 40°).

Strengthening

- Scapular stabilization exercises (sidelying).
- Deltoid isometrics in neutral (submaximal) as ROM improves.

Precautions

- No pulley/canes until 5 weeks post-op (these are active motions).

Phase 2 | 4-8 Weeks

GOALS FOR THIS PHASE

- Discontinue abduction pillow at 4 weeks.
- Discontinue sling at 5 weeks.
- Begin AAROM and advance to AROM as tolerated.
- Defer internal rotation / behind back until 6 weeks.
- Begin cuff isometrics at 5 weeks with arm at side.

Immobilization

- Discontinue abduction pillow at 4 weeks post-op.
- Discontinue sling use at 5 weeks post-op.

Range of Motion

- Begin AAROM and advance to AROM as tolerated.
- Elevation in scapular plane and external rotation as tolerated.
- No internal rotation or behind back until 6 weeks post-op.

Strengthening

- Begin cuff isometrics at 5 weeks post-op with arm at the side.

Phase 3 | 8-12 Weeks

GOALS FOR THIS PHASE

- Advance from AAROM to AROM as tolerated.
- Begin internal rotation as tolerated.
- Light stretching at end ranges.
- Continue cuff isometrics with arm at side.

Range of Motion

- Active assist to active ROM shoulder as tolerated.
- Elevation in scapular plane and external rotation to tolerance.
- Begin internal rotation as tolerated.
- Light stretching at end ranges.

Strengthening

- Cuff isometrics with arm at side.

Conditioning

- Upper-body ergometer.

Phase 4 | 3-12 Months

GOALS FOR THIS PHASE

- Advance to full ROM as tolerated with passive end-range stretching.
- Advance strengthening: isometrics → bands → light weights (1-5 lbs); 8-12 reps / 2-3 sets per rotator cuff, deltoid, and scapular stabilizers.
- Limit strengthening to 3x/week to avoid rotator cuff tendonitis.
- Begin eccentrics, plyometrics, proprioception drills.
- Sports rehab at 4.5 months; throwing at 6 months; mound at 9 months; collision sports at 9 months.
- MMI usually at 12 months.

Range of Motion

- Advance to full ROM as tolerated with passive stretching at end ranges.

Strengthening

- Advance strengthening as tolerated: isometrics → bands → light weights (1-5 lbs); 8-12 reps / 2-3 sets per rotator cuff, deltoid, and scapular stabilizers.
- Strengthening 3x/week to avoid rotator cuff tendonitis.
- Begin eccentrically resisted motions, plyometrics (e.g., weighted ball toss), proprioception (e.g., body blade).

Return to Sport Milestones

- Sports-related rehab at 4.5 months, including advanced conditioning.
- Return to throwing at 6 months.
- Throw from pitcher's mound at 9 months.
- Collision sports at 9 months.
- MMI usually at 12 months post-op.

This protocol is a general guideline. Progression is patient-specific and at the discretion of William McLaughlin, MD.