

The Weak Shoulder Exercise Program

The strength of your shoulder depends on the coordinated working of several groups of muscles, including the muscles of the rotator cuff, the deltoid, the pectoralis major and the muscles that power the shoulder blade. The simple exercises described here are designed to help you optimize the strength and coordination of these muscle groups.

The primary exercise is called the progressive supine press (Fig 1). It is most effective for helping you regain the ability to use your arm in an elevated position. The nice thing about this exercise is that you can do it by yourself and can adjust your rate of progress according to what is most comfortable for you. The exercise proceeds in small steps. In the first stage you simply push your hand up toward the ceiling.

Start by lying on your back, grasping a washcloth with both hands together (Fig 1A). Push the cloth straight up toward the ceiling. At the end of each push, lift your entire shoulder off the bed or floor. When you can do this 20 times easily, separate your hands an inch or so when you push the cloth toward the ceiling. This places slightly more of the load on the muscles of your weaker shoulder. As the exercise gets easier, separate your hands more on the washcloth until you can push your hand toward the ceiling without any assistance from the opposite arm. Practice this exercise with nothing in your hand until you are able to repeat it 20 times. Then take an empty pint container and perform the same movement, pushing it toward the ceiling (Fig 1C). Add water to increase the resistance slowly. When the container is full of water, the weight is about one pound. Make sure that with each press up you end by lifting your shoulder blade up off the bed or floor. We call this the “press plus.” Be sure that you can perform the movement comfortably 20 times at each stage before advancing to the next stage.

When you can press one pound toward the ceiling 20 times, the next step is to perform the exercise with your back propped up slightly on pillows or by using a recliner or garden chair (Fig 1D). When 20 comfortable repetitions are possible, increase the degree of which your back is propped up. At each level, push the shoulder all the way up: “press plus.” Continue this process until you are able to push the one pound weight 20 times toward the ceiling in a sitting or standing position (Fig 1E). Work for smooth, slow, controlled motions. This program optimizes the mechanics of your shoulder and gives you the best chance of regaining good function.

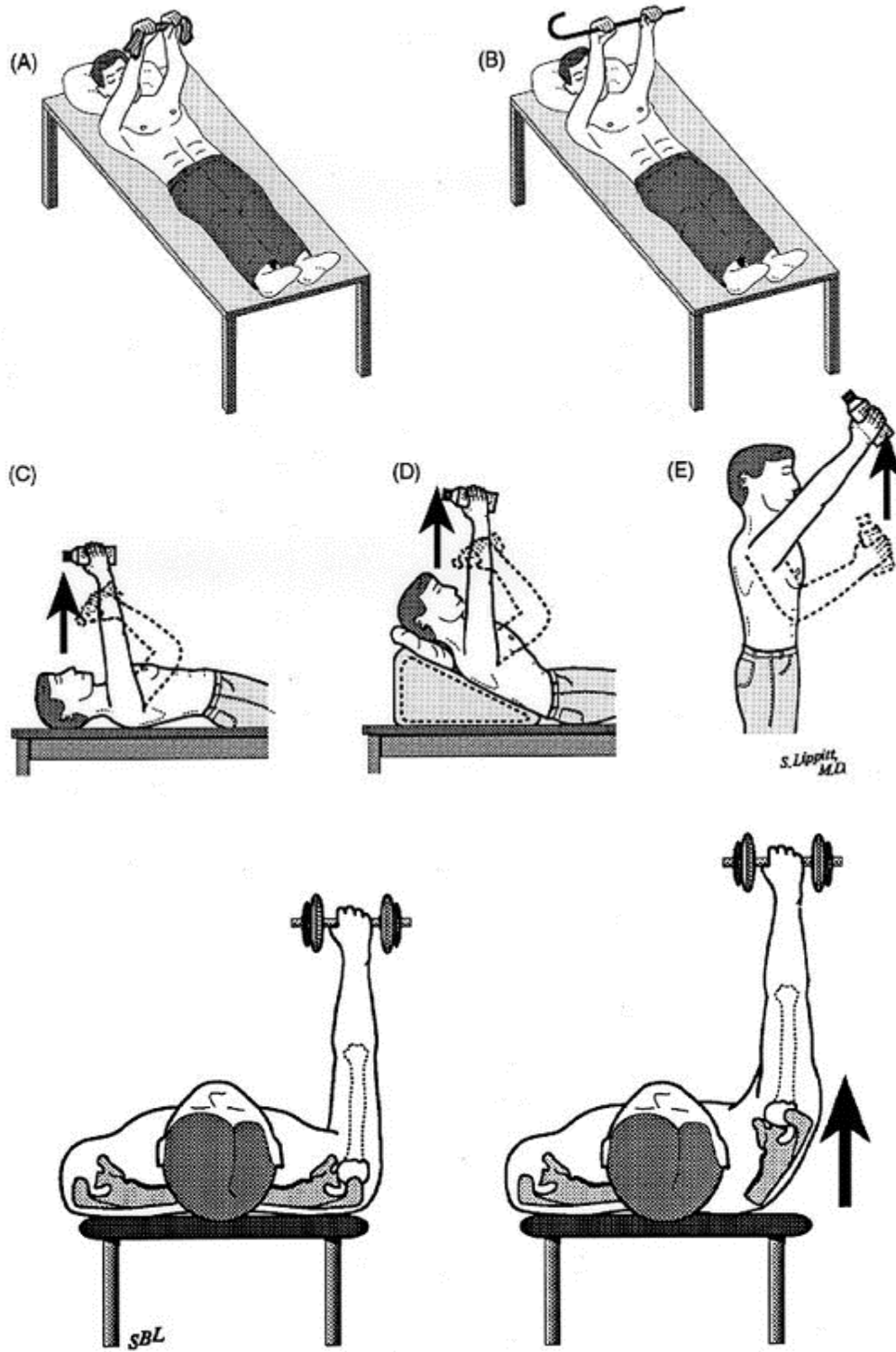


Figure 1.

The second exercise is the shoulder shrug (Fig 2). The trapezius is strengthened by shoulder shrugs made with the arms holding some weight at the side. As with the supine press, you should begin with light weight (a soup can, for instance) and progress when you can perform 20 shrugs comfortably. For balance purposes, this exercise should be performed with both arms at the same time.

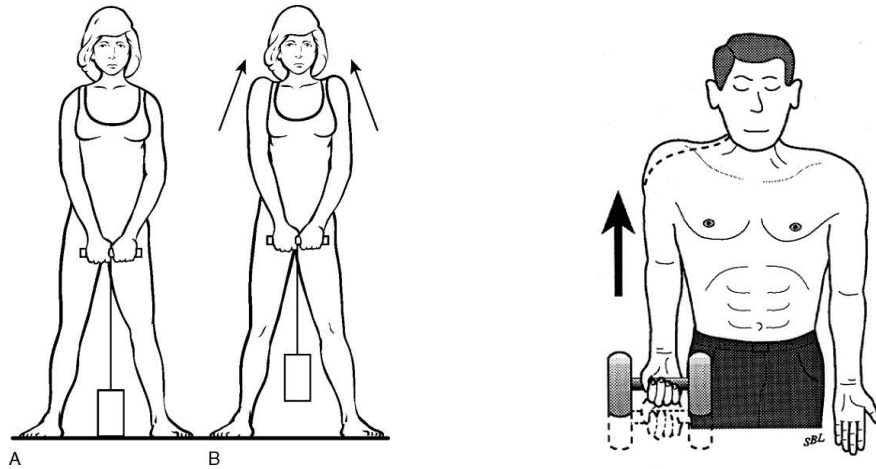


Figure 2.

The third set of exercises involves strengthening of the deltoid muscle. There are three parts to the deltoid muscle (the front, side and back) and each of these parts can be isolated for strengthening. These exercises can either be done with a hand weight or a theraband (rubber tubing). To strengthen the anterior (front) part of the deltoid, attach the theraband to a door knob behind you (Fig 3). Start with your elbow bent 90 degrees, arm at your side, palm up to the ceiling. Push your arm out in front of you to shoulder level, gently turning your palm down toward the ground as you push.

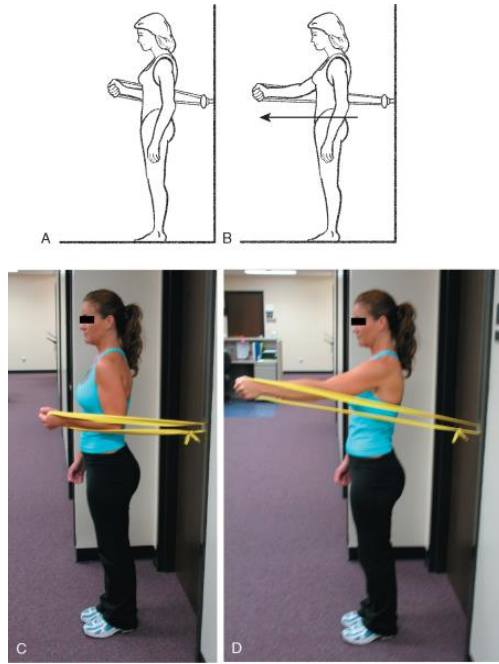


Figure 3.

To strengthen the lateral (side) part of the deltoid, turn your body so you are now sideways to the door knob (Fig 4). Start with your elbow bent 90 degrees, arm at your side. Raise your elbow out to the side, stopping at a 45 degree angle from your body.

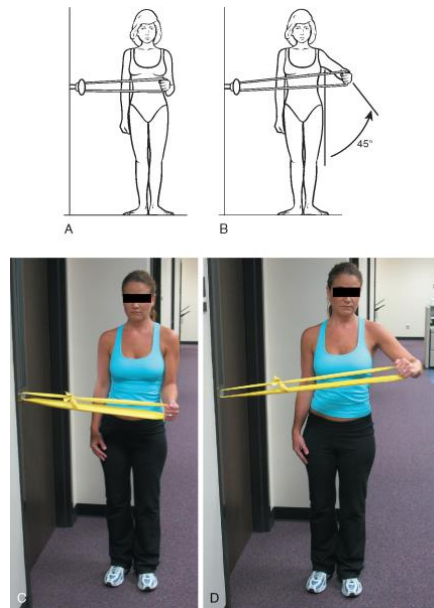


Figure 4.

To strengthen the posterior (back) part of your deltoid, turn to face the door knob (Fig 5). Start with your elbow bent 90 degrees, arm at the side. Pull your elbow back behind you, stopping at 45 degrees from your body.

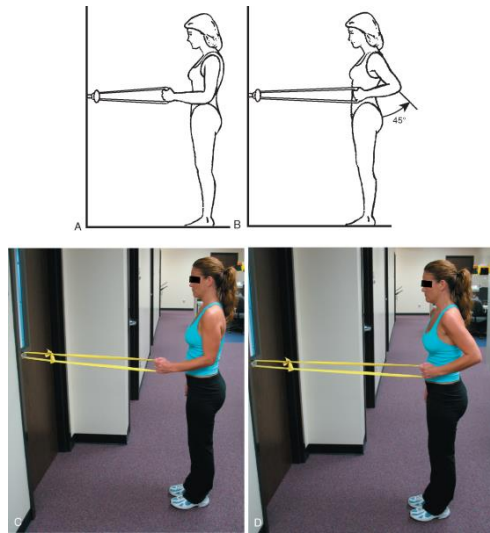


Figure 5.

The final set of exercises is strengthening of the internal and external rotators of the shoulder. These muscles can be strengthened with isometric exercises, theraband (rubber tubing) or weights. As with the supine press and shoulder shrug, we begin gently with isometrics and light rubber tubing and then progress.

Internal rotation is turning the entire arm toward the body (Fig 6). Whether performing isometrics, rubber tubing or weights, the exercise begins with the elbow at the side at 90 degrees and the arm pointed straight ahead. During isometrics, simulate turning your arm inwards while resisting the motion with your opposite hand. When using the theraband, attach one end of the band to a door knob. With your affected shoulder towards the door, turn your arm inwards against the resistance of the tubing. When using weights, lie on the side of your affected shoulder and turn your arm inwards toward your body and the ceiling. This exercise should be performed 10 to 20 times.

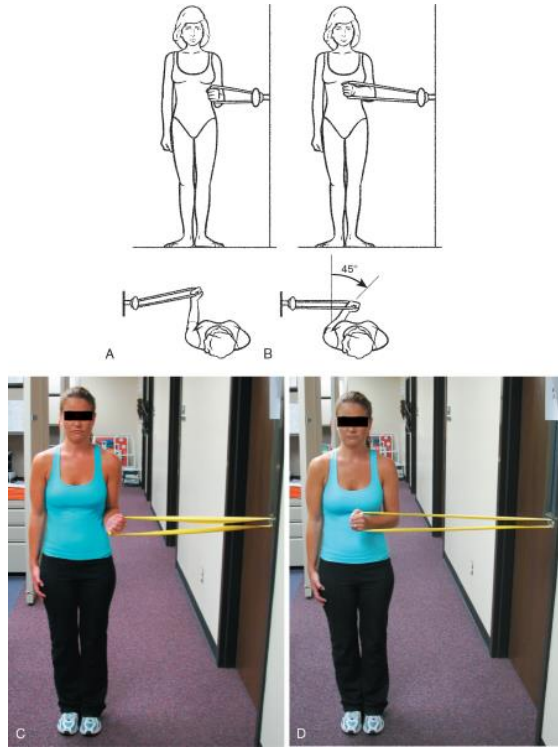


Figure 6.

External rotation is turning the entire arm away from the body (Fig 7). The exercise begins with the elbow 90 degrees at the side and the arm pointed straight ahead. During isometrics, simulate turning your arm outwards while resisting the motion with your opposite hand. Concentrate on keeping your elbow at your side during the exercise. When using the theraband, attach one end of the band to a door knob. With your good shoulder toward the door, hold the end of the theraband and turn your arm outwards against the resistance of the tubing. Again, be sure to keep your elbow at your side. When using weights, lie on the good shoulder, hold the weight in your affected arm and turn your arm outwards toward the ceiling. This exercise should be performed 10 to 20 times.

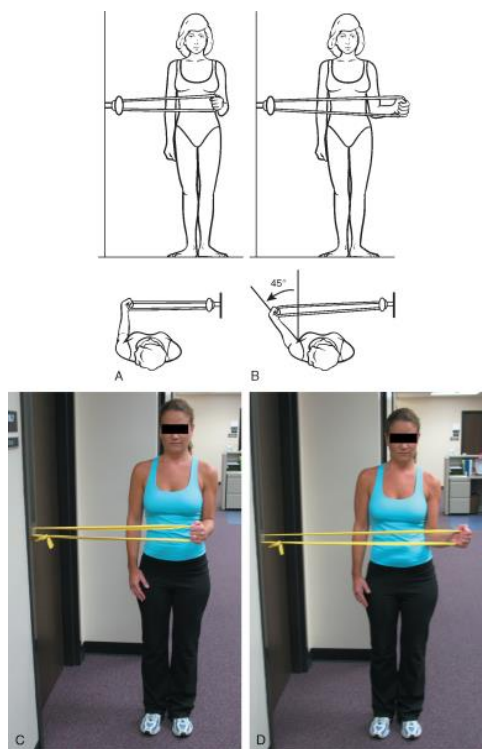


Figure 7.

The entire exercise program should be performed one to three times each day. Most patients begin to experience benefit within six weeks. Once you have achieved significant improvement, the frequency of the exercise program can be decreased. Often, the program needs to be continued every day or every other day in order to protect against recurrence of pain and weakness.

General conditioning exercises such as swimming, light resistance rowing machine, elliptical machines and brisk walking are excellent for restoring coordination, endurance and general well-being. Make sure that these

exercises are performed with your affected shoulder in a non-elevated position, or with your hand always below the level of your shoulder.