

Return-to-work guidelines: Rotator cuff repair



These guidelines were developed in collaboration with the New Zealand Orthopaedic Association (NZOA). The recommended return-to-work timeframes reflect the expert clinical opinion of the New Zealand Shoulder and Elbow Society.

Overview

This document provides guidelines for recovery and return to work for patients who have undergone rotator cuff repair.

This includes procedures performed under the following ACC elective surgery codes:

Code	Procedure Description
SHU80	Shoulder arthroscopic repair — 1, includes single tendon rotator cuff repair
SHU81	Shoulder arthroscopy and proceed to open repair — 1, includes single tendon rotator cuff repair
SHU90	Shoulder arthroscopic repair — 2, includes rotator cuff repair two or more tendons
SHU91	Shoulder arthroscopy and proceed to open repair — 2, includes rotator cuff repair two or more tendons

For advice on determining the correct medical certification for your patient's injury, please see the Return-to-work guidelines appendix: ACC certification advice.

Expected recovery timeline

The expected recovery timeline varies depending on the individual patient, the specifics of the surgery and the work type. The following are general guidelines.

The patient's ability and tolerance to perform work tasks should be considered as well as appropriate modifications and restrictions. This will inform the patient, employer and ACC of the suitability for returning to work, either at full, light or alternative duties.

There is strong evidence that a safe and timely return to work results in better patient outcomes. Early return to work with modified duties/hours should be encouraged when appropriate. ACC can provide support to help your patient return to work safely.

Return-to-work recommendations

Work type classification (as per ACC45 claim form):

Work type	Description	Example
Sedentary	Brief standing and walking	Office, desk worker
Light	Mainly standing and walking	Retail, hospitality worker
Medium	Often lifting 5kg plus	Courier, warehouse worker
Heavy	Often lifting 9kg plus	Builder, mechanic, farm worker
Very Heavy	Often lifting 22kg plus	Firefighter, forestry worker

Expected full return-to-work timeframes

The timeframes below for **normative full return to work (FRTW)**. Return to work should commence as soon as it is safe to do so, even in a modified capacity or with alternative duties. Partial return to work with a **'fit for selected work' certificate should be considered within the first 3 weeks**.

Work type	Timeframe for FRTW	Considerations
Sedentary	6-8 weeks	Modified duties required eg one-handed typing and lifting Pain level, ability to sleep and the use of opiate medication may affect the ability to process and perform cognitive functions Assistance with transport to and from work

Work type	Timeframe for FRTW	Considerations
Light	2-4 months	<p>Waist level/desk based</p> <p>Modified duties required e.g. one-handed typing and lifting</p> <p>Elbow is held by the side until cleared for active ROM</p> <p>No lifting with affected arm until cleared for resistance work (minimum 12 weeks)</p>
Medium	3-6 months	<p>Overhead work will be dependent on recovery of strength and ROM, and may take longer to recover than lifting below shoulder level</p> <p>Recovery of ROM is required prior to strengthening</p> <p>Recovery of strength is required before a return to lifting at shoulder height or above</p> <p>In heavy/very heavy work types, greater recovery of strength is required before a return to lifting at shoulder height or above</p>
Heavy	5-8 months	
Very Heavy	6-12 months	

Restrictions and/or modifications

Activity	Expected timeframe	Considerations
Driving	6 weeks	Automatic vs. manual, power-steering
Lifting below shoulder-level	2-3 months	Weight, strengthening
Lifting above shoulder-level (overhead)	5-8 months	Weight, range of motion

Flags for delayed recovery

Signs of delayed recovery can include:

- Large, retracted rotator cuff tears
- Massive cuff tear requiring augmentation or partial repair
- Further injury to shoulder during the recovery phase
- Frozen shoulder/excess stiffness after 3 months
- Persistent pain after 3 months
- Post-op Infection
- Unexpected weakness beyond 4 months
- Prolonged use of opiate medication

If you think the patient is going to be outside the expected recovery timeframes, please let ACC know.

ACC can help your patient return to work by providing:

- vocational rehabilitation programmes
- specialised equipment and technology to support recovery at work
- assistance with transport to and from work
- occupational workstation assessments
- functional assessments
- specialised vocational medical services

For more information

Visit our website or call us on **0800 222 070**.

We're here to help.

