



## Shoulder Directions

Shoulder Directions allow you to release and regain control of the muscles that elevate, depress, adduct, and abduct the scapulas and shoulders. Shoulder Directions are practiced by lying on one side (like in the Side Curl), and sliding the working shoulder up, down, forward, backward, and in forward and backward circles. This exercise relieves tension and pain in the neck and shoulders, and alleviates frozen shoulder, thoracic outlet syndrome, and carpal tunnel syndrome.

### EXERCISE DESCRIPTION

**Starting Position:** Lie down on your left side on your carpet or exercise mat. Bend your knees up in front of you at 90 degrees as if you're setting up for the Side Curl. You can rest your head on your left arm; either stretch your left arm out straight above your head (so that your left arm is in a straight line with your spine), or bend your left arm and rest your head in the crook of your elbow. If it is not comfortable to rest your head on your arm, you can use a small pillow. Just make sure that your head, neck, and spine remain in a straight line. Rest your right hand on the floor in front of you, and let your right arm relax and be bent at about 90 degrees, with your right elbow resting on the right side of your stomach.

**Movement:** Slide your right shoulder up toward your right ear. Notice what you feel contracting, then very slowly and gently release so that your shoulder comes back to where you started. Now slide your shoulder down toward your hip. Notice what you feel contracting, then very slowly, gently release to let your shoulder come back to neutral. Repeat this sequence a few times, then relax in your neutral position.

Bring your right arm up to rest on top of your right side, so that it is lying on top of your right waist and hip. Slowly press your right shoulder forward, and notice what you feel contracting. Then very slowly release and let your shoulder slide back to neutral. Then slowly press your shoulder backward, and notice what you feel contracting. Then slowly release it back to neutral. Repeat this sequence several times, then relax in your neutral position.

Now you can do shoulder circles. Slide your shoulder all the way up toward your ear, then very slowly move your shoulder forward, starting to make a large circle. Continue moving in that direction and move your shoulder down toward your hip, and then backward. Then slowly finish up the circle, bringing your shoulder up

toward your ear. Then slowly let your shoulder return to neutral.

Do a medium sized circle in that same direction, then finish up by doing a very small circle in that same direction.

Now you can do circles in the opposite direction, and this time start with the small circle and work your way up to the large circle. Slide your shoulder up toward your ear about one inch, then press it back behind you, then down toward your hip, then forward, then up toward your ear, and then relax to neutral.

Do a medium sized circle in that same direction, then finish up by doing a large circle in that same direction.

**When you're done, practice these movements on the other side.**

## ANATOMY OF SHOULDER DIRECTIONS

Shoulder Directions use the muscles that elevate and depress the scapula:

### **Elevation of scapula:**

- Upper trapezius
- Rhomboid major and minor
- Levator scapula

### **Depression of scapula:**

- Lower trapezius
- Serratus anterior
- Pectoralis minor

Shoulder Directions also use the muscles that abduct and adduct the scapula and shoulder (this can be confusing; if you need a visual, refer to *Trail Guide to the Body*):

### **Abduction of scapula** (moving shoulder blade away from the spine):

- Serratus anterior
- Pectoralis minor

### **Adduction of scapula** (moving the shoulder blade toward the spine):

- Middle trapezius
- Rhomboid major and minor

### **Horizontal abduction of shoulder** (moving the shoulder backward):

- Deltoid
- Infraspinatus
- Teres minor

**Horizontal adduction of shoulder** (moving the shoulder forward):

Deltoid

Pectoralis major

## CONDITIONS HELPED BY SHOULDER DIRECTIONS

Shoulder Directions address the following conditions by releasing and restoring control to the muscles that elevate, depress, adduct, and abduct the scapulas:

Neck tightness and pain

Shoulder tightness and pain

Frozen shoulder

Thoracic outlet syndrome

Carpal tunnel syndrome

## HOW TO TEACH SHOULDER DIRECTIONS

**Get the student in their starting position.** The student should lie down on their side and bend their knees, just as they would set up for the Side Curl. They can rest their head on their left arm or on a small pillow; just make sure their spine is straight. Tell your student to rest their right hand on the floor in front of them, and to let their right arm be relaxed.

**Invite the student to close their eyes.** Closing their eyes removes all the visual information that their brain would otherwise have to process. Keeping the eyes closed allows the student to focus completely on their internal sensations.

**Teach the first movement.** Instruct your student to slide their right shoulder up toward their ear, and notice what they feel contracting. Then tell them to release as slowly as possible to let their shoulder come back down to neutral. Then instruct your student to slide their right shoulder down toward their hip, and notice what they feel contracting. Then tell them to release as slowly as possible to let their shoulder come back to neutral. Instruct your student to slide their shoulder up and down like this several times, always releasing as slowly as possible back to neutral in between each movement.

**Teach the second movement.** Instruct your student to lift up their right arm and rest it on top of the right side of their body, so it's lying on top of their right waist and hip. Tell them to press their right shoulder forward, and notice what they feel contracting. Then tell them to release as slowly as possible to let their shoulder come back to neutral. Then instruct your student to press their shoulder backward, so their right shoulder blade is sliding closer to their spine, and to notice what they feel contracting. Then tell them to release as slowly as possible to let their shoulder come back to

neutral. Instruct your student to press their shoulder forward and backward like this several times, always releasing as slowly as possible back to neutral in between each movement.

**Teach the shoulder circles.** You'll talk your student through three forward circles, starting with a large circle. Tell your student to slide their shoulder up toward their ear as far as is comfortable. Then tell them to start moving their shoulder forward, starting to make a large circle. Tell the student to continue moving their shoulder in this direction, moving very slowly and consciously, and trying to make the circle as smooth as possible. When they've completed the large circle, talk them through a medium-sized circle. They can start by sliding their shoulder about halfway up toward their ear. Ask them to notice how the medium-sized circle feels different than the large one did. When they've completed the medium-sized circle, talk them through a small circle. They can start by sliding their shoulder up toward their ear about one inch. Ask them to notice how this small circle feels different than the other two did.

When they've completed the small circle, talk your student through three backward circles. Start with the small circle, then do the medium-sized circle, then finish with the large circle. Remind your student to move as slowly and as consciously as possible, and to make the circles as smooth as possible.

When the student has completed the shoulder circles, ask them to gently roll onto their back. You can take a moment here to let the student rest and ask them to notice how their right and left shoulders feel different. Then ask them to roll onto their right side, and get them set up to do the movements with their left shoulder.

### **Common mistakes:**

Since gravity is not helping with the release of these movements, there can be a tendency for students to actively *bring* their shoulders back to their neutral starting position. If they do this, they will not get the benefit of the movements. Tell your student to focus on releasing their muscles to *allow* their shoulders to come back to neutral—even if it feels like their shoulders are not coming back all the way. Counting can help students slow down during the release.

Make sure your student always releases completely to neutral in between each direction and takes a moment to rest in neutral before doing the movement in the other direction. If they don't release completely to neutral, or if they rush from one movement to the next, they are training themselves to retain unnecessary muscle tension in their shoulders.

There is a tendency to want to rush through the shoulder circles because they are a mental challenge. You can count for your student or encourage them to count to 16 or more as they do each circle. Encourage your student to try to do each circle more

slowly than the last one.

There can be a lot of jumpiness or jitters when doing the shoulder circles. Encourage your student to notice these jumps and jitters, and to slow down and focus even more so that they can smooth out their movement.

### **The following is an example of how I teach the Shoulder Directions:**

Gently come down to the floor, and lie down on your left side on your carpet or exercise mat. Bend your knees up in front of you as if you're setting up for the Side Curl. You can rest your head on your left arm – either stretch your left arm out straight above your head (so that your left arm is in a straight line with your spine), or bend your left arm and rest your head in the crook of your elbow. If it is not comfortable to rest your head on your arm, you can use a small pillow. Just make sure that your head, neck, and spine remain in a straight line.

Make sure your torso isn't rolling forward or rolling backward – get right up there on your left side. Bring your thighs to a 90 degree angle with your torso, and your lower legs to a 90 degree angle with your thighs. Rest your right hand on the floor in front of you, and let your right arm relax and be bent at about 90 degrees, with your right elbow resting on the right side of your stomach. There is no need for any tension in your right arm during any of these movements. You'll be using muscles that control the movement of your shoulder, and your arm can stay relaxed and just go along for the ride.

First, slide your right shoulder up toward your right ear. Only slide it as high as is comfortable for you. Notice what you feel contracting – this movement mainly involves the upper trapezius, which is that muscle on the top of the shoulders that tends to get tight and sometimes sore. Feel that gentle contraction, and then very slowly and gently release that contraction so that your shoulder slowly comes back to where you started. Don't pull your shoulder down – just release it very slowly back to neutral.

Now that your shoulder is at that neutral starting point, you can slide it in the opposite direction, down toward your hip. Notice what muscles are helping you do this movement. You should feel some gentle contraction in the muscles along the right side of your torso, from your right armpit down to your waist and hip. Very slowly, gently release these muscles to let your shoulder come back to neutral. Don't pull your shoulder up - just release the contraction and allow your shoulder to slide back up.

Go ahead and repeat this sequence a few times, moving as slowly and as consciously as you can. These movements should be taking all of your mental focus. Notice if your shoulder is moving smoothly, or if there are little jumps and jitters in your movement. If you notice some jumps and jitters, see if you can move even more slowly and use more focus to smooth out your movement. Remember, don't pull your shoulder back to neutral each time – just let it come back to neutral by releasing.

When you've moved your shoulder up and down several times, slowly let your shoulder come back to neutral, and rest.

Now you'll work with the forward and backward movement of your shoulder. Bring your right arm up to rest on top of your right side, so that it's lying on top of your right waist and hip. Remember, you're moving your shoulder in these movements, and the muscles in your arm can stay completely relaxed. Slowly press your right shoulder forward. When you've pressed it as far forward as you want to, very slowly release and let your shoulder slide back to that neutral starting place. Don't actively bring your shoulder back - just slowly release and allow it to come back.

Now you can move your shoulder in the opposite direction: slowly press your shoulder backward. When you've pressed it as far back as you want to, slowly start releasing it back toward neutral. Don't bring it forward, just release and allow it to come back.

You can repeat this sequence several times. Start by very slowly pressing your shoulder forward and sensing what muscles you feel contracting. This movement is mainly using your pectoral muscles. By very slowly, smoothly releasing back to neutral you're teaching yourself how to release these muscles.

As you press your shoulder backward, sense what muscles you're using. In this movement you're using mainly your rhomboids and your middle trapezius to bring your shoulder blade closer to your spine. Very slowly, very smoothly release these muscles to allow your shoulder to come back to neutral.

Finish up and allow your shoulder to slowly come back to neutral. Now that you've explored the movement of your shoulder in these four basic directions, you can start to explore a larger range of motion by doing some shoulder circles.

Start by sliding your shoulder up toward your ear, as far as you can go comfortably but without forcing it. Now very slowly start moving your shoulder forward, starting to make a large circle. This is going to be a very slow, big circle. Continue moving in that direction and move your shoulder down toward your hip, or the bottom of the circle. Then continue the circle and press your shoulder back behind you. Then slowly finish up the circle, bringing your shoulder up toward your ear. Slowly let your shoulder slide back to neutral.

Now you'll do a medium sized circle in the same direction. Slide your shoulder about halfway up toward your ear. Slowly start moving your shoulder forward, creating a medium sized circle this time. Notice how it feels different than the big circle felt. Continue the circle by moving your shoulder down toward your hip, then back behind you, then up toward your ear, and then relax down to neutral.

You'll do one last circle in this direction. This time you'll do a very small circle, as slowly and with as much focus as possible. Slide your shoulder up toward your ear just about one inch, then start to make that very slow, small circle by moving your shoulder forward, then down

toward your hip, then back behind you, then up toward your ear, and then relax to neutral.

Now you can do circles in the opposite direction, and this time you'll start with the small circle and work your way up to the large circle. So start by sliding your shoulder up toward your ear about one inch, then press it back behind you, then down toward your hip, then toward the front, up toward your ear, and then relax to neutral.

Now you can do the medium sized circle. Slide your shoulder about halfway up toward your ear, and start moving it back behind you. As you do this circle, notice whether it feels very smooth and round, or if there are parts of the circle that are a little jumpy or not completely round. See if you can slow down and use even more mental focus to smooth out your circle and make it really round.

When you're done with that circle, relax back to neutral. You'll finish up by doing one large circle in this direction. Slide your shoulder all the way up toward your ear, and then start moving your shoulder backward to start making that big circle. See how smooth and round you can make this circle. When you finish the circle, slowly release and let your shoulder come back to neutral.

Slowly and gently roll onto your back, with your knees bent up and your feet on the floor. Since you've done these movements with only your right side so far, notice any differences you feel between your right and left shoulders.

When you're ready, roll onto your right side. Bend your knees up in front of you at 90 degrees, and rest your head on your right arm or on a pillow in whatever way is comfortable for you.

(Teach movement sequence with left shoulder.)