Thawing the ‘frozen shoulder’ mystery

Is your shoulder freezing, frozen, or thawing? If you have suffered from a “frozen shoulder,” you are all too familiar with these terms.

Frozen shoulder syndrome (adhesive capsulitis) is a poorly understood and painful condition. People between the ages of 40 and 60 are most likely to develop a frozen shoulder, but no one seems to know why. It may occur after an injury or surgery, but often it appears to start for no reason at all.

Frozen shoulder syndrome has been thought of as a “self-limiting condition” by the medical community, meaning it will go away in time. However, new treatments and research are attempting to thaw the frozen shoulder mystery.

Frozen shoulder typically follows a pattern. In the early stages, flexibility and pain get worse. Movement becomes very restricted during the day and pain affects sleep at night. For these reasons, the first stage has been labeled the “freezing” stage. About one third through the process of a typical course of frozen shoulder syndrome, the flexibility loss and pain hit a plateau (“frozen stage”). Finally, both the pain and flexibility start to improve (“thawing stage”). Eventually, most “frozen shoulders” return back to normal, but it takes an average of 30 months.

Research has shown that aggressive rehabilitation does not shorten the length of frozen shoulder syndrome. More invasive treatments such as steroid shots and manipulation (aggressive stretching under anesthesia) show mixed results.

However, newer training and rehabilitation techniques are proving fruitful. Patients are feeling pain relief in one to two treatments and regaining up to 30 degrees of movement their first visit. This can mean the difference between barely reaching the steering wheel and driving without pain again.

Another piece of advanced technology, low-level light therapy (laser therapy), is also showing promise. Laser therapy emits light into the inflamed tissue and actually accelerates the natural healing process. Adding laser therapy to an already effective therapy program may result in a faster recovery.

Joan Ward is a physical therapist in Rochester and works at ActivePT.