ACROMIO-CLAVICULAR JOINT STRAIN (also called AC joint strain)

1. What is it?
   It is an injury of the joint between the outer end of the collarbone (clavicle) and the acromion process of the shoulder blade (scapula).

2. What causes it?
   It is usually caused by a fall onto the shoulder following a tackle.

3. Symptoms – what you notice
   a. Pain – sudden onset over the joint. Also when the arm is moved across the front of the chest.
   b. Deformity – in cases of complete rupture of the main ligaments near the AC joint (a third degree strain), there may be a step deformity over the AC joint.
   c. Weakness – this is usually on account of increased pain when the AC joint is under heavy load.

4. Signs – what the doctor finds
   a. Deformity – if there is a third degree strain of the AC joint, a step deformity will be present. More minor injuries tend not to produce any deformity.
   b. Tenderness – this is maximal over the AC joint.
   c. Pain on cross-arm testing, when the arm is pulled across the front of the chest.

5. Investigations
   X-rays show the position of the two bones which make up the AC joint. If there is no obvious abnormality on standard x-rays, stress views are performed. You hold a standard weight in each hand and see if the injured joint opens up. If the AC joint has been subject to prolonged heavy loading, there may be x-ray evidence of bony resorption from the outer end of the collarbone.

6. Treatment
   a. First aid – an icepack should be applied over the injured shoulder. Take Panadol or anti-inflammatory tablets.
   b. Some people find strapping the injured joint helps to reduce the pain a good deal.
   c. If the pain remains troublesome after a week or two, a local cortisone injection may be considered. Talk to your doctor about the pros and cons of this. It can help players return to passing drills more quickly. (NB: If you are an elite athlete subject to drug testing, you will need to fill out a TUE form for the cortisone injection).
   d. In rare cases, surgery may be required. It is important to appreciate that reduction of the deformity is not necessary to obtain good function of the injured shoulder.

7. Recovery time
   Average recovery time is 3-6 weeks.

8. Recovery sequence
   Step 1  Pain relief, possibly strapping.
   Step 2  If significant pain persists beyond one week after injury, consider a local cortisone injection.
   Step 3  Perform the recommended muscle rehabilitation exercises under the supervision of a physiotherapist.
   Step 4  Practice skills for your sport.
   Step 5  Get a clearance from your doctor and physio before returning to team training.

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