

Scapular Winging Exercises

Overview

Scapular winging occurs when one or both shoulder blades (scapulae) protrude from the back instead of lying flat against the ribcage. This condition can cause discomfort and difficulty in performing daily activities, especially arm movements. Engaging in specific exercises can help strengthen the muscles around the shoulder blades, improve stability, and alleviate symptoms.

This handout provides a detailed guide to exercises that support recovery and enhance shoulder function. Before starting these exercises, consult your healthcare provider to ensure they are appropriate for your condition.

Exercise 1: Scapular retraction

Objective: Strengthen the muscles that retract and stabilize the shoulder blades.

Instructions:

1. Stand upright with your feet shoulder-width apart. Allow your arms to hang naturally at your sides.
2. Slowly pull your shoulder blades backward as if trying to squeeze them together. Keep your shoulders relaxed and avoid shrugging them upward.
3. Focus on moving your shoulder blades and not on moving your arms.
4. Maintain the squeeze for 10 seconds.
5. Slowly release the tension and allow your shoulder blades to return to their resting position.
6. Perform 10 repetitions, ensuring each movement is controlled.

Tip: Imagine holding a small object between your shoulder blades to maintain proper form.

Exercise 2: External rotation with resistance band

Objective: Strengthen the muscles that rotate the shoulder outward, improving scapular stability.

Equipment needed: A resistance band securely attached to a closed door or another stable object at waist height.

Instructions:

1. Stand sideways to the anchored band, with the arm farthest from the band holding the free end.
2. Keep your elbow bent at a 90-degree angle and close to your side. Your forearm should be across your body.
3. Slowly rotate your arm outward, pulling the band away from your body. Keep your elbow close to your side throughout the movement, allowing only your forearm to move.
4. Gently return your arm to the starting position, controlling the resistance.
5. Complete 12–15 repetitions, then switch to the other arm.

Tip: Focus on controlled movements and avoid letting the band snap back.

Exercise 3: Horizontal row

Objective: Strengthen the muscles of the upper back and enhance scapular retraction.

Equipment needed: Two resistance bands anchored in front of you at about chest height.

Instructions:

1. Kneel on a comfortable surface with your back straight and core engaged.
2. Hold one end of each band with your arms extended straight in front of you.
3. Pull both bands toward your chest, bending your elbows and squeezing your shoulder blades together.
4. Keep your back straight and avoid leaning forward or backward. Slowly extend your arms back to the starting position while maintaining control of the bands.
5. Perform 12–15 repetitions.

Tip: Focus on pulling with your shoulder blades rather than your arms to target the correct muscles.

Exercise 4: Standard pushups

Objective: Build overall upper body strength and improve scapular control.

Instructions:

1. Begin in a plank position with your hands placed slightly wider than shoulder-width apart.
2. Keep your body in a straight line from head to heels, engaging your core muscles.
3. Lower your body by bending your elbows, keeping your elbows slightly angled outward.
4. Lower yourself until your chest is just above the floor.
5. Push through your hands to return to the starting position.
6. Start with as many pushups as you can perform with good form, working up to 12–15 repetitions over time.

Modification: If full pushups are too challenging, start with knee pushups by lowering your knees to the ground while keeping your body in a straight line.

Exercise 5: Angel wings

Objective: Enhance scapular mobility and strengthen the muscles responsible for stabilizing the shoulder blades.

Instructions:

1. Stand with your feet shoulder-width apart.
2. Raise your arms overhead, bringing your hands together as if you were about to perform a jumping jack.
3. Bend your elbows so that your hands are above your head and your elbows are pointing outward.
4. Slowly lower your elbows to the sides while keeping your hands above your head.

5. Squeeze your shoulder blades together as your elbows move downward, mimicking the movement of angel wings.
6. Focus on bringing your shoulder blades together rather than just moving your arms.
7. Gradually return to the starting position with your arms overhead.
8. Perform 12–15 repetitions.

Tip: Move slowly and with control, focusing on the contraction of the shoulder blade muscles.

Reference

University of California, San Francisco Orthopaedic Institute. (2014). *Scapular stabilization protocols*. <https://sportsrehab.ucsf.edu/sites/sportsrehab.ucsf.edu/files/Scapular%20Stabilization%20Protocol.pdf>