Torn Bicep and Triceps Muscles

Overview

Torn bicep and triceps muscles are common in strength training and resistance exercises.

A biceps strain, or a **pulled biceps**, occurs when there is a partial tear in one or more of the small fibers that make up your biceps muscle. The bicep muscle, biceps brachii, is located in the front of your upper arm. Your biceps is responsible for bringing your arm up in a forward motion, bending your arm at the elbow, and rotate the forearm.

Most commonly, muscle strains and tears of all types occur because of what is called an **eccentric contraction**. This happens when you tense your muscle in one direction while at the same time a force is opposing this tension. When this outside force battles against your tensing or contracting force, a muscle tear or strain can result.

Bicep and triceps tears are both caused by the same issue: when the resistance applied against your muscles (e.g., by a weight) is more than the force your muscles can provide in return. In this instance, your muscle actually lengthens (or tears) as it is contracting. So, for example, if you are doing a preacher curl with too much weight isolated on your biceps, there is a good possibility you will tear your muscles because they simply do not have the strength to resist the weight you are curling.

Imagine a rubber band. At normal levels, it can spring right back and provide adequate resistance to the force applied against it. But, if it’s pulled past its breaking point, the fibers in the rubber stretch, weaken, and ultimately snap. This is a similar result in a torn bicep or triceps muscle. Usually you don’t break all the fibers at once, but you may strain and damage a few.

Mild to severe arm pulls are extremely common in strength training and sports that involve stressing the upper arm. These sports include:
Symptoms

An upper arm muscle tear can be quite painful. The specific symptoms you’ll experience with a pulled biceps or triceps depends upon the severity of the strain.

Common symptoms of a strained biceps or triceps include:

- sudden, sharp pain in the upper arm (front – biceps; back – triceps) during exercise – most usually felt resistance activities (e.g., lifting weights in a curling motion) and potentially accompanied by a “popping” feeling.
- a spasm or stiffness in the affected muscle
- swelling and tenderness
- bruising in the affected arm muscle, elbow, or forearm (indicates blood vessels have been broken)
- overall weakness in your upper arm
- gap or irregularity in the affected muscle (if the tear is severe or you ruptured the muscle). Note that biceps and triceps can also detach. In these cases, you may see a ball of muscle fiber since there is no outside force to keep the muscle elongated.

Injuries can be caused from a one-time event (e.g., too much weight at one time) or gradually over time (e.g., excessive weight, overtraining, not enough warm up, not enough recovery time, or poor technique).

There are numerous possible causes of a pulled biceps or triceps muscle, however, let’s take a look at some of the most common causes:

- attempting to lift too heavy of weight
- being overtired or not warming up prior to resistance or strength training activity
- lack of flexibility in the muscles
- repetitive motion stress (e.g., throwing, striking, or hitting a ball)
- poor strength
- overstretching the muscle (pushing the muscles past their tension threshold)
- sudden stress on the lower arm while contracting the upper arm.
- impact to the muscles by an outside force

You have more of a chance of pulling a muscle when you are fatigued or not yet warmed up.
Severity

Your pulled arm muscles will be assigned a grade based on the following:

Grade 1

- tightness in the front of the upper arm (biceps) or back of the upper arm (triceps)
- ability to flex and extend arm at the elbow, but aware of discomfort
- minimal swelling
- contracting the affected muscle, especially against resistance, will not cause too much pain

Grade 2

You have experienced partial tearing of the muscle fibers. You may experience:

- twinges of pain during activity
- visible swelling and pressure will increase pain
- bruising, redness, and warmth on the upper arm
- ability to flex or extend the arm at the elbow is compromised
- pain when contracting the muscle, especially against resistance

Grade 3

You have fully torn (ruptured) some muscle fibers in your biceps or triceps. You may experience:

- severe pain, especially when contracting the muscle with or without resistance
- visible and immediate swelling
- contraction will cause pain and potential bulging/spasm of the muscle
- range of motion and overall mobility will be limited or suspended

Chronic Injury

Not categorized as a grade 1, 2 or 3, chronic injuries are characterized by the fact that they keep occurring. When you experience multiple arm muscle pulls over the course of several months to several years, it is a sign that you have some internal damage or weakness that the body has not yet been able to overcome. Taking the time to recovery properly will pay dividends later on. Chronic injuries usually mean scar tissue, which can cause difficulties later in life as the body naturally becomes weaker.
Treatment

When you tear your biceps or triceps, you immediately discover how much you rely on these muscles to carry on normally throughout the day. Thankfully, you don’t have to endure the pain and hardship for too long. Here are some recovery recommendations:

The most commonly accepted approach to treatment is the RICE technique (Rest, Ice, Compress, Elevate) which is usually accompanied with an anti-inflammatory to alleviate pain. This is good practice within the first 36 hours of your injury. It will keep swelling down, which ultimately will help the recovery process.

It’s usually best not to ice more than three to four times per day for about ten minutes per session. After one to two days, you’ll get limited benefit from ice.

Alternatives to RICE

RICE is by no means your only option, and some other approaches can help athletes quickly and effectively recover.

No matter what your level of injury, you need to accomplish the following:

- Increase the circulation to your biceps or triceps. More energy and blood flow means faster recovery.
- Reduce the swelling in the triceps or biceps. Whether you see it or not, internal and external inflammation is the cause of your pain.
- Remove the toxins. Eliminating toxins is essential for a full recovery for your biceps/triceps tear.

Once your recovery process is underway, begin to lightly workout your arm muscles. This will promote needed circulation, and help to insure that newly formed muscle tissue is orienting itself properly. Overall, some mild exercise will limit scar tissue and hasten the healing process. Don’t over use your arms too soon, however.
Prevention

Suffering from a biceps or triceps tear is a reminder of how much your health is worth. It’s always easier to take things for granted when there are no issues, but if you’ve been dealing with an injury for even a few days, it can be a real disruption.

Some key principles to follow to assist in full recovery and prevent future muscle pulls.

- Try not to compensate for pain or weakness in one muscle group by overusing muscles in other areas. Biceps and triceps are opposing muscle groups, and keeping each group in balance with the other is important. If you biceps are capable of much more than your triceps, or vice versa, you may put yourself in an injury prone position.
- Don’t favor strength over flexibility, or vice versa. If you are strong by tight, you up your chances of pulling a muscle. If you are flexible, but lack strength, you are no better off. The best way to maintain a good, healthy condition is to keep strength and flexibility balanced.
- If you do not regularly tax your biceps or triceps muscles in your normal exercise routine or sport, incorporate exercises into your strength training routine that seek to strengthen and stretch these important muscles.
- Warm up properly. Like all your muscles, your biceps and triceps are more flexible when they are warmed up, so be sure to break a light sweat before going full steam.
- During strength training make sure you start your workout with lighter weights and smaller repetitions to prepare the muscles for the activity ahead.
- Be sure to learn the proper techniques for your sport or exercise of choice. When you know how to perform the movements correctly – particularly which muscle groups to use effectively – not only will your enjoyment and skill level improve, but your chance for injury will dramatically decrease.

Stretch after your body is warmed up. Often athletes stretch before hand. It’s okay to lightly stretch to “wake up” your muscles and joints, but trying to stretch for flexibility while you are cold is not good practice. It’s much more effective for you to stretch after you have broken a full sweat. Your muscles are more elastic and receptive.