(e) ISSN Online: 2321-9599

(p) ISSN Print: 2348-6805

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Comparative Analysis of the Functional Outcomes of Open vs. Arthroscopic Shoulder Surgery in Rotator Cuff Injuries

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ABSTRACT:

Aim: This study aimed to compare the functional outcomes of open versus arthroscopic shoulder surgery in patients with rotator cuff injuries. **Material and Methods:** A total of 120 patients, aged 18 to 75 years, diagnosed with rotator cuff tears confirmed by imaging (MRI or ultrasound), were randomly assigned to one of two surgical groups: open surgery (n = 60) and arthroscopic surgery (n = 60). Exclusion criteria included significant comorbidities such as severe osteoarthritis, infection, or previous shoulder surgeries to minimize confounding factors. Both groups underwent preoperative evaluations using the Constant-Murley Shoulder Score (CMS) and the American Shoulder and Elbow Surgeons (ASES) Score. Postoperatively, all patients followed a structured rehabilitation protocol aimed at restoring range of motion, strength, and function. Follow-up assessments were conducted at 6 weeks, 3 months, 6 months, and 1 year, measuring functional outcomes, including patient-reported outcomes and objective measures like strength and range of motion. **Results:** At baseline, demographic characteristics, including age, gender, and symptom duration, were comparable between the two groups. Both groups showed significant improvement in functional scores over the course of the study. At 1 year postoperatively, the open surgery group achieved a Constant-Murley Score (CMS) of 81.4 ± 10.2 and an ASES score of 78.2 ± 11.4, while the arthroscopic group achieved a CMS of 83.3 ± 9.8 and an ASES score of 80.5 ± 10.6. Both groups showed improvements in range of motion (ROM), with the arthroscopic group demonstrating slightly better results in forward flexion, external rotation, and internal rotation at the 1-year follow-up. Strength recovery was also better in the arthroscopic group, with a mean strength score of 4.1 ± 1.0 compared to 3.8 ± 1.2 in the open surgery group. In terms of postoperative pain, measured using the Visual Analog Scale (VAS), the arthroscopic group reported a lower mean pain score of 1.8 ± 1.4 compared to 2.1 ± 1.5 in the open surgery group. **Conclusion:** Both open and arthroscopic shoulder surgeries were effective in improving functional outcomes in patients with rotator cuff injuries, with both groups demonstrating significant improvements in strength, range of motion, and overall function over time. While the arthroscopic surgery group showed slightly superior outcomes in strength recovery and pain relief, the differences between the two approaches were not statistically significant. Both techniques were associated with low complication rates, though the open surgery group had slightly higher rates of infection and reoperation. Ultimately, both open and arthroscopic shoulder surgeries can be considered viable treatment options, with arthroscopic surgery potentially offering advantages in terms of postoperative recovery and lower complication rates.

Keywords: rotator cuff injuries, open surgery, arthroscopic surgery, functional outcomes, postoperative recovery

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This article may be cited as: Srivastava AK, Agarwal P. Comparative Analysis of the Functional Outcomes of Open vs. Arthroscopic Shoulder Surgery in Rotator Cuff Injuries. J Adv Med Dent Scie Res 2016;4(6):530-535.

INTRODUCTION

Rotator cuff injuries are among the most common causes of shoulder pain and dysfunction, particularly in adults. These injuries involve damage to the group of muscles and tendons that stabilize the shoulder joint, facilitating a wide range of motion. The rotator cuff plays a vital role in shoulder stability and mobility, and any damage to it can significantly impair function. These injuries can range from partial tears to complete ruptures, and the severity of the tear often dictates the treatment approach. The management of rotator cuff injuries has evolved over the years, with both open and arthroscopic surgical techniques being commonly used to repair these tears. However, the optimal surgical method remains a topic of ongoing debate, and the comparison of functional outcomes between open and arthroscopic surgery continues to be a significant area of research.[1,2]

Open surgery for rotator cuff repair has been the traditional approach, offering direct access to the torn tendon and allowing for a thorough repair, particularly in cases of large or complex tears. This technique involves a larger incision over the shoulder, and the surgeon has a clear view of the rotator cuff and the surrounding structures. The advantages of open surgery include better visualization of the tear, which may be crucial for complex repairs, and the ability to address any associated conditions, such as bone spurs or significant tendon degeneration, in a single procedure. However, open surgery is often associated with a longer recovery period, more postoperative pain, and a higher risk of complications due to the invasiveness of the procedure.[3,4]

In contrast, arthroscopic shoulder surgery, which is a minimally invasive procedure, has gained popularity in recent years due to its numerous advantages. During an arthroscopic procedure, small incisions are

made, and a tiny camera (arthroscope) is inserted to provide the surgeon with a clear view of the shoulder joint. Specialized instruments are used to perform the repair through these small incisions. The primary benefits of arthroscopic surgery include reduced postoperative pain, shorter hospital stays, quicker recovery, and a lower risk of complications such as infection and nerve injury. This technique has become the preferred choice for many surgeons, especially for patients with smaller tears or those requiring a less invasive approach. However, the limitations of arthroscopic surgery include its learning curve, the inability to fully visualize the entire tear in certain cases, and the potential for incomplete repairs, particularly in complex or large rotator cuff tears.[5,6]

Both surgical approaches have demonstrated effectiveness in repairing rotator cuff tears, but the functional outcomes, recovery times, and complication rates associated with each technique continue to be areas of active investigation. Understanding the comparative functional outcomes of open versus arthroscopic surgery is essential for improving clinical decision-making and optimizing patient care. While both techniques aim to restore shoulder function and alleviate pain, it remains unclear whether one method is consistently superior to the other, particularly in terms of long-term functional outcomes.[7,8]

Functional outcomes are typically assessed through a combination of objective measures, such as range of motion (ROM), strength, and clinical scores, alongside subjective measures, including patient-reported outcomes (PROs) such as pain, satisfaction, and overall shoulder function. Among the most commonly used clinical scoring systems for rotator cuff surgery are the Constant-Murley Score (CMS) and the American Shoulder and Elbow Surgeons (ASES) Score. These tools provide valuable insight into a patient's recovery progress, including pain levels, mobility, strength, and overall functional capacity. Comparing these outcomes between open and arthroscopic techniques is crucial for determining which approach offers the best results for different patient populations.[9]

One of the major factors influencing the choice of surgical technique is the severity and size of the rotator cuff tear. Larger tears, particularly those that involve multiple tendons, may require open surgery due to the need for more extensive repair. In contrast, smaller tears are often amenable to arthroscopic repair, which may be sufficient for restoring function and alleviating pain. Despite this, there is a growing body of evidence suggesting that arthroscopic surgery may provide similar, if not superior, outcomes to open surgery, even for larger tears, especially with advancements in surgical techniques and instrumentation. However, there are concerns that the limited visualization and technical challenges associated with arthroscopy might hinder the complete repair of more complex tears.[10]

Complications also play a significant role in determining the success of rotator cuff repair. Both open and arthroscopic surgeries carry inherent risks, such as infection, stiffness, nerve damage, re-tear of the rotator cuff, and blood clots. Open surgery tends to have a higher risk of complications due to the larger incisions and more invasive nature of the procedure, while arthroscopic surgery is generally associated with fewer complications, owing to its minimally invasive approach. However, the lower risk of complications in arthroscopic surgery must be weighed against the potential for incomplete repairs or the challenges of addressing more complex injuries with this technique. Additionally, some studies have suggested that the learning curve associated with arthroscopic surgery can result in variable outcomes, particularly in less experienced hands.[11]

In recent years, the debate between open and arthroscopic surgery has been fueled by studies comparing postoperative functional outcomes, pain relief, and recovery times between the two techniques. Several studies have suggested that arthroscopic surgery results in quicker recovery and fewer complications, while others have found that open surgery may lead to better long-term outcomes in terms of tendon healing and functional restoration. These findings highlight the need for further comparative research to determine the relative advantages and disadvantages of each approach, particularly in terms of patient-specific factors such as tear size, age, activity level, and overall health.[12]

MATERIAL AND METHODS

In this study, a total of 120 patients diagnosed with rotator cuff injuries were enrolled to compare the functional outcomes of open versus arthroscopic shoulder surgery. The inclusion criteria for this study consisted of individuals aged 18 to 75 years, presenting with rotator cuff tears confirmed by imaging studies (MRI or ultrasound) and who were deemed candidates for surgical intervention. Patients with significant comorbidities such as severe osteoarthritis, infection, or previous shoulder surgeries were excluded from the study to avoid confounding variables. The patients were randomly assigned to one of two surgical groups: the open surgery group (n = 60) and the arthroscopic surgery group (n = 60). The open surgery group underwent traditional open repair techniques, while the arthroscopic group received minimally invasive surgery using arthroscopic procedures.

Both groups underwent standardized preoperative assessments, including clinical evaluation using the Constant-Murley Shoulder Score (CMS) and the American Shoulder and Elbow Surgeons (ASES) Score. Postoperative rehabilitation followed a structured protocol involving physical therapy designed to promote healing and restore range of motion, strength, and function. Patients were followed up at regular intervals (6 weeks, 3 months, 6 months,

and 1 year) postoperatively, during which functional outcomes were assessed using the same scoring systems.

Data collection included both subjective measures such as patient-reported outcomes and objective measures including range of motion, strength, and complications. Statistical analysis was performed using paired t-tests and chi-square tests to compare preoperative and postoperative outcomes within and between groups. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$. The primary aim of the study was to evaluate and compare the functional recovery and complication rates between the two surgical approaches.

RESULTS

Table 1: Demographic and Baseline Characteristics of Study Participants

The demographic data of the participants in the study reveals that both the open surgery and arthroscopic surgery groups were comparable in terms of age, gender distribution, and shoulder involvement. The average age of participants was similar between the groups, with the open surgery group having a mean age of 58.5 ± 10.2 years, while the arthroscopic surgery group had a slightly lower mean age of 57.8 ± 9.9 years. Gender distribution was also similar across both groups, with a slightly higher proportion of males (approximately 67%) in both groups. A majority of the patients in both groups (76.7% in the open surgery group and 80% in the arthroscopic surgery group) had their dominant shoulder injured. The mean duration of symptoms prior to surgery was comparable, with the open surgery group having a mean of 18.2 ± 7.5 months and the arthroscopic surgery group having 17.8 ± 7.3 months. Preoperative functional scores, as measured by the Constant-Murley Score (CMS) and the ASES Score, showed no significant difference between the two groups, with the open surgery group scoring 42.4 ± 10.3 on the CMS and 45.3 ± 12.5 on the ASES, while the arthroscopic surgery group had scores of 43.1 ± 9.8 and 46.2 ± 11.3, respectively.

Table 2: Postoperative Functional Outcomes at Different Follow-Up Intervals

Functional outcomes, as measured by the Constant-Murley Score (CMS) and the ASES Score, were assessed at multiple follow-up intervals, including 6 weeks, 3 months, 6 months, and 1 year. At 6 weeks post-surgery, both groups showed improvement in functional scores. The open surgery group had a CMS of 52.6 ± 12.1 and an ASES score of 50.5 ± 13.2, while the arthroscopic group showed a slightly better outcome with a CMS of 53.2 ± 10.9 and an ASES of 51.4 ± 12.1. At the 3-month follow-up, both groups exhibited further improvement, with the open surgery group achieving a CMS of 60.4 ± 13.7 and an ASES of 58.1 ± 14.2, while the arthroscopic group reached a CMS of 62.3 ± 11.5 and an ASES of 59.7 ± 13.8. By 6 months, both groups continued to show significant improvements, with the open surgery group scoring 69.8 ± 11.9 on the CMS and 66.4 ± 14.3 on the ASES, while the arthroscopic group had scores of 72.1 ± 10.3 and 68.9 ± 12.5, respectively. At the 1-year follow-up, both groups exhibited substantial functional recovery, with the open surgery group achieving a CMS of 81.4 ± 10.2 and an ASES of 78.2 ± 11.4, while the arthroscopic group reached a CMS of 83.3 ± 9.8 and an ASES of 80.5 ± 10.6. Overall, both groups showed similar functional improvements over time, with arthroscopic surgery showing slightly superior outcomes at each interval, although these differences were not statistically significant.

Table 3: Postoperative Range of Motion (ROM) at 1 Year

At the 1-year follow-up, both groups demonstrated similar improvements in range of motion (ROM). The open surgery group had a mean forward flexion of 161.5 ± 12.3 degrees, while the arthroscopic group showed a slightly better mean of 164.2 ± 11.7 degrees. For external rotation, the open surgery group had a mean of 39.2 ± 8.4 degrees, while the arthroscopic group had a slightly higher mean of 41.1 ± 7.9 degrees. Internal rotation was also similar between the groups, with the open surgery group having a mean of 63.7 ± 9.1 degrees and the arthroscopic group having 65.4 ± 8.6 degrees. These results suggest that both surgical techniques were effective in improving the ROM of patients, with arthroscopic surgery showing slightly better results, although the differences were not clinically significant.

Table 4: Postoperative Strength Scores at 1 Year

Strength assessment at the 1-year follow-up showed a slight difference between the two groups. The open surgery group had a mean strength score of 3.8 ± 1.2, while the arthroscopic surgery group had a higher mean score of 4.1 ± 1.0. This difference in strength scores was statistically significant, indicating that patients in the arthroscopic group had slightly better strength recovery. In terms of pain, as measured by the Visual Analog Scale (VAS), the open surgery group reported a mean pain score of 2.1 ± 1.5, while the arthroscopic surgery group had a slightly lower mean score of 1.8 ± 1.4, suggesting a lower level of postoperative pain in the arthroscopic group.

Table 5: Complications and Reoperation Rates

Complication rates were assessed at the 1-year follow-up, with both groups showing relatively low complication rates. The open surgery group had a slightly higher incidence of infection (3.3%) compared to the arthroscopic group (1.7%), though this difference was not statistically significant. Stiffness occurred in 8.3% of patients in the open surgery group, compared to 5% in the arthroscopic group. Reoperation rates were also slightly higher in the open surgery group, with 6.7% of patients

requiring reoperation, compared to 3.3% in the arthroscopic group. Nerve injury occurred in 1.7% of the open surgery group, while no cases of nerve injury were reported in the arthroscopic group. Overall, both groups had low complication rates, but the open surgery group had slightly higher rates of infection, stiffness, reoperation, and nerve injury.

Table 1: Demographic and Baseline Characteristics of Study Participants

Characteristic	Open Surgery Group (n=60)	Arthroscopic Surgery Group (n=60)
Age (mean ± SD)	58.5 ± 10.2	57.8 ± 9.9
Gender (Male/Female)	40/20	42/18
Dominant Shoulder Injured	46 (76.7%)	48 (80%)
Mean Duration of Symptoms (months)	18.2 ± 7.5	17.8 ± 7.3
Preoperative Constant-Murley Score (mean ± SD)	42.4 ± 10.3	43.1 ± 9.8
Preoperative ASES Score (mean ± SD)	45.3 ± 12.5	46.2 ± 11.3

Table 2: Postoperative Functional Outcomes at Different Follow-Up Intervals

Follow-up Interval	Open Surgery Group (n=60)	Arthroscopic Surgery Group (n=60)
6 Weeks	**CMS**: 52.6 ± 12.1	**CMS**: 53.2 ± 10.9
	ASES: 50.5 ± 13.2	**ASES**: 51.4 ± 12.1
3 Months	**CMS**: 60.4 ± 13.7	**CMS**: 62.3 ± 11.5
	ASES: 58.1 ± 14.2	**ASES**: 59.7 ± 13.8
6 Months	**CMS**: 69.8 ± 11.9	**CMS**: 72.1 ± 10.3
	ASES: 66.4 ± 14.3	**ASES**: 68.9 ± 12.5
1 Year	**CMS**: 81.4 ± 10.2	**CMS**: 83.3 ± 9.8
	ASES: 78.2 ± 11.4	**ASES**: 80.5 ± 10.6

Table 3: Postoperative Range of Motion (ROM) at 1 Year

Measure	Open Surgery Group (n=60)	Arthroscopic Surgery Group (n=60)
Forward Flexion (°)	161.5 ± 12.3	164.2 ± 11.7
External Rotation (°)	39.2 ± 8.4	41.1 ± 7.9
Internal Rotation (°)	63.7 ± 9.1	65.4 ± 8.6

Table 4: Postoperative Strength Scores at 1 Year

Measure	Open Surgery Group (n=60)	Arthroscopic Surgery Group (n=60)
Strength (mean ± SD)	3.8 ± 1.2	4.1 ± 1.0
Pain (VAS Score, mean ± SD)	2.1 ± 1.5	1.8 ± 1.4

Table 5: Complications and Reoperation Rates

Complication Type	Open Surgery Group (n=60)	Arthroscopic Surgery Group (n=60)
Infection (%)	2 (3.3%)	1 (1.7%)
Stiffness (%)	5 (8.3%)	3 (5%)
Reoperation (%)	4 (6.7%)	2 (3.3%)
Nerve Injury (%)	1 (1.7%)	0 (0%)

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to compare the functional outcomes, range of motion, strength recovery, and complication rates between open and arthroscopic shoulder surgery in patients with rotator cuff injuries.

The demographic characteristics of the study participants were similar between the open surgery and arthroscopic surgery groups. Both groups were predominantly male (approximately 67%) and had similar age distributions, with a mean age of 58.5 years for the open surgery group and 57.8 years for the arthroscopic surgery group. This is consistent with previous studies by Miller et al. (2010), which also reported a mean age of 58 years in patients undergoing rotator cuff surgery. The duration of symptoms was comparable between the two groups, with an average duration of 18.2 months in the open surgery group and 17.8 months in the arthroscopic group.[1] Similar findings were reported by Diercks et al. (2010), who observed that the duration of symptoms ranged from 12 to 24 months in a cohort of patients undergoing rotator cuff surgery, suggesting that both surgical approaches were performed on patients with similar disease severity.[2]

Functional outcomes were measured at multiple time points (6 weeks, 3 months, 6 months, and 1 year), and both groups showed significant improvement over time. At the 1-year follow-up, the open surgery group achieved a CMS of 81.4 ± 10.2 and an ASES score of 78.2 ± 11.4, while the arthroscopic group reached a

CMS of 83.3 ± 9.8 and an ASES score of 80.5 ± 10.6. These results align with findings from a study by Kuhn et al. (2011), who found that both open and arthroscopic surgeries resulted in substantial functional recovery, with patients reporting a significant improvement in their ASES scores over a 1-year follow-up.[3] The slight superiority of arthroscopic surgery in this study was consistent with previous literature, such as the work by Rhee et al. (2013), which reported that arthroscopic surgery provided better functional outcomes in terms of pain relief and overall shoulder function, though the differences were modest and not always statistically significant.[4]

The results from the 1-year follow-up showed similar improvements in range of motion (ROM) between the two groups. The open surgery group had a mean forward flexion of 161.5 ± 12.3° and the arthroscopic group had a slightly higher value of 164.2 ± 11.7°. For external rotation, the open surgery group had a mean of 39.2 ± 8.4°, while the arthroscopic group had 41.1 ± 7.9°. These results are consistent with those from a study by Aoki et al. (2012), who also reported no significant differences in ROM between open and arthroscopic surgery at 1 year.[5] Both surgical approaches improved external and internal rotation, which supports the findings of studies such as those by Bhatia et al. (2013), who concluded that both techniques were effective in restoring shoulder motion in patients with rotator cuff tears.[6] The slight advantage in ROM observed in the arthroscopic group in this study corroborates findings from other studies, including those by Yamaguchi et al. (2012), which noted slightly better outcomes in arthroscopic surgery regarding ROM, though the differences were minimal.[7]

Strength recovery was also assessed at the 1-year follow-up, where the open surgery group had a mean strength score of 3.8 ± 1.2, compared to 4.1 ± 1.0 in the arthroscopic group. This difference was statistically significant and suggests that patients undergoing arthroscopic surgery may experience slightly better strength recovery. In terms of pain, the open surgery group had a mean VAS score of 2.1 ± 1.5, while the arthroscopic group reported a lower score of 1.8 ± 1.4, indicating less postoperative pain. These results are in line with the study by Lyman et al. (2011), which reported that arthroscopic surgery resulted in better strength outcomes and less pain in patients undergoing rotator cuff repair.[8] Similarly, other studies, including those by DeFranco et al. (2011), found that arthroscopic techniques were associated with lower pain scores, potentially due to the reduced trauma to the soft tissues and smaller incisions used in the procedure.[9]

Regarding complications, the open surgery group had a slightly higher incidence of infection (3.3%) compared to the arthroscopic group (1.7%), though this difference was not statistically significant. Additionally, the open surgery group had higher rates of stiffness (8.3%) and reoperation (6.7%). These findings are consistent with those reported by Bedi et al. (2011), who found that open surgery for rotator cuff repair was associated with higher complication rates, including stiffness and infection, compared to arthroscopic techniques.[10] However, the rates in this study were lower than those in some other studies, such as that by Di Benedetto et al. (2010), which reported infection rates as high as 5% in patients undergoing open rotator cuff repair.[11]The lower reoperation rate observed in the arthroscopic group (3.3%) is consistent with findings from a study by Yoshihara et al. (2012), which suggested that arthroscopic surgery results in fewer complications and a lower rate of subsequent surgeries.[12]

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, both open and arthroscopic shoulder surgeries demonstrated significant improvements in functional outcomes, range of motion, and strength in patients with rotator cuff injuries. While arthroscopic surgery showed slightly superior outcomes in strength recovery and pain relief, the differences between the two approaches were not statistically significant. Both techniques were associated with low complication rates, with open surgery having slightly higher rates of infection and reoperation. Overall, both surgical options proved to be effective, with arthroscopic surgery potentially offering advantages in postoperative recovery and complication rates.

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