

Complex Regional Pain Syndrome

What is it?

Complex Regional Pain Syndrome, or CRPS is a disorder seen when swelling, stiffness, burning pain and hypersensitivity occur in a stronger pattern than would be expected for the injury. CRPS is sometimes called reflex sympathetic dystrophy, or RSD.

What does CRPS feel and look like?

What you may feel is that the burning pain and painful sensations are much greater than they should be. You may notice changes in:

- skin temperature – your hands, arms or feet may feel hot or cold
- your skin – which may look thin and shiny
- skin colour – your hands, arms or feet may be blotchy, blue, or pink

You may also notice an increase in:

- swelling
- stiffness, or the stiffness may be beyond the original area of injury
- sweating or no sweating
- hair growth, or loss of hair
- nail growth, or thick or brittle nails

With hand injuries, sometimes people will also have shoulder pain. Over time CRPS can lead to muscle weakness and permanent movement losses.

How do I know if I have CRPS?

Doctors will look for at least 3 of the above symptoms to be present, and will ask about when they happened. There is no one test for CRPS. Your doctor may order x-rays, a bone scan, and/or an EMG (electromyogram: a nerve test) in order to see if you have CRPS or another problem.

Why do you get CRPS?

CRPS can even happen after the original injury has healed, or without a known trauma. We do not know why some people get CRPS and others do not.

What can be done if I have CRPS?

Finding out if you have CRPS and being treated right away is important. Often, when CRPS symptoms are identified and treated early, they settle and do not increase in number or get worse.

If you have had CRPS in the past, you should discuss this with your doctor before any surgeries, particularly if they are in the same area.

Treatment often involves 2 areas:

- **Therapy:** Physiotherapists and Occupational Therapists can help you with exercise programs to maintain the movement of stiff joints, manage swelling, and continue in your daily activities at home and work.
- **Pain Management:** You and your doctor will figure out what pain medication may help. Your doctor may also refer you to a pain management specialist. This specialist may suggest nerve blocks to help control the pain and allow you to work hard in therapy.

We are here to help

Complex Regional Pain Syndrome can be a painful and frustrating problem for both patients and health care providers, but early identification and treatment gives the best results.

If you have CRPS you may get depressed, feel irritable; it can be hard to manage day-to-day stresses. Please talk with us if you have any of these feelings, we are here to help you.

Websites

www.mayoclinic.com/health/complex-regional-pain-syndrome/DS00265

www.bodyinmind.org (type CRPS into the search box)