

Pain Solutions

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Complex Regional Pain Syndrome



What is CRPS (or RSD)?

Complex Regional Pain Syndrome (CRPS), also referred to as Reflex Sympathetic Dystrophy Syndrome (RSD), is a chronic progressive disease characterized by severe pain, swelling and changes in the skin. Experts believe that CRPS occurs as a result of dysfunction in the central or peripheral nervous system.

CRPS can strike at any age and affects both men and women, although most experts agree it is more common in young women.

What are the symptoms?

The key symptom of CRPS is continuous, intense pain out of proportion to the severity of the injury (if an injury has occurred). This pain gets worse rather than better over time. CRPS most often affects one of the extremities and is often accompanied by:

- Burning pain
- Increased skin sensitivity
- Changes in skin temperature
- Changes in nail or hair growth patterns
- Swelling or stiffness in affected joints
- Changes in skin color
- Changes in skin texture
- Motor disability

How does it progress?

Stage 1: CRPS begins as severe pain in a limb. The pain might be accompanied by swelling, sensitivity to touch and temperature, and some skin changes. Skin changes include drying and tearing. This stage is thought to last from 1 to 3 months.

Stage 2: Stage two lasts approximately 3-6 months. It is characterized by intensifying pain, swelling, decreased hair growth, cracked, brittle, grooved, or spotty nails, softened bones, stiff joints, and/or weak muscle tone.

Stage 3: CRPS patients experience limited movement in the affected limb and often irreversible skin damage. Pain becomes unyielding and may involve the entire limb or affected area. There may be muscle atrophy and involuntary contractions of the muscles or tendons that flex the joints.

What causes CRPS?

Doctors are not sure exactly what causes CRPS. The most recent theories suggest that many cases of CRPS occur after a forceful trauma to an arm or leg, such as a gunshot wound, surgery, heart attacks, injections, fractures, and even sprained ankles. It is not well understood why these injuries sometimes trigger CRPS.

What treatment options are available?

Dramatic improvement and even remission of CRPS is possible. Treatment options include:

- Medications
- Applying hot and cold packs
- Capsaicin Cream
- Physical therapy
- Sympathetic nerve-blocking medication
- Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulation (nerve stimulation)
- Biofeedback
- Spinal cord stimulation
- Intrathecal drug pumps



Additional Information:

American Chronic Pain Foundation - www.theacpa.org

American RSDHope Association - www.rsdhope.org

Reflex Sympathetic Dystrophy Syndrome Association - www.rsd.org