

WHAT IS COMPLEX REGIONAL PAIN SYNDROME (CRPS)?

Complex regional pain syndrome (CRPS) is a debilitating, painful condition that causes persistent burning pain in the arms or legs along with increased sensitivity to touch, swelling, discolouration, changes in temperature, and sweating. Sometimes the whole of the limb is affected, but the pain is most commonly localised to the hand and wrist, foot and ankle, or the knee.

The condition is diagnosed using a set of clinical guidelines known as the '*Budapest criteria*' that look at physical changes in the limb (sensitivity to touch, sweating, swelling, and discolouration) in addition to the location and intensity of pain.

CRPS is divided into two classifications:

Type 1 or CRPS I is what used to be called *Reflex Sympathetic Dystrophy* (RSD) and you may find that your GP or Specialist may still refer to it by that name. Type 1 occurs when a patient suffers an illness or an injury with no direct damage to a nerve.

Type 2 or CRPS II used to be known as *Causalgia* and occurs when there has been a known injury to a nerve.

WHAT CAUSES CRPS?

The exact cause of CRPS is not known, but 1 in 4 cases are the result of a minor injury to the limb that goes on to experience the symptoms of CRPS within a month or so. The condition usually affects only one limb, with only 7% of reported cases spreading to additional limbs.

Since so many people can recover from injuries without experiencing CRPS, there is no evidence to suggest that the injury itself is the trigger, but the subsequent symptoms suggest that problems with the elements of the nervous system that regulate blood flow and skin temperature can contribute to the physical aspects of the condition.

WHAT'S IT LIKE TO HAVE CRPS?

The leading symptom of CRPS is debilitating pain in the affected limb that can reduce over time or persist for months. The type of pain can vary from patient to patient, as can the range of other symptoms listed below:

Condition/Abnormality	Symptoms
Debilitating Pain	Experienced as: sharp, stabbing, stinging, tingling, or numbness to the point where the limb feels abnormal or "alien".
Sensory (<i>Allodynia</i>)	Hypersensitivity to light touch (even clothing touching the affected area)
Vasomotor	Temperature change (hot or cold) and discolouration of the skin
Sudomotor (Oedema)	Increased sweating and persistent swelling (oedema) of the limb
Motor/trophic	Decreased range of motion and/or weakness and tremors on the limb. Some patients also experience slower nail and hair growth (trophic)

WILL I GET BETTER?

There is currently no known cure for CRPS, but with treatment plans focused on pain reduction and preserving or restoring the mobility of the affected limb, the condition can respond in a variety of ways. For some, the condition will improve quickly, but for others the symptoms will persist for longer periods of time. Since CRPS only involves the injured area or limb, it is unlikely to spread to other limbs and its impact on your quality of life can be controlled.

WHAT KINDS OF TREATMENT ARE AVAILABLE FOR CRPS?

CRPS can be a painful and frustrating condition. Not knowing what caused it, and if or when the symptoms will subside can be very stressful. The appropriate treatment can vary from patient to patient, and it can take some time to arrive at the right mixture of elements for that treatment. Your GP/Specialists are committed to reducing your pain and improving your quality of life through a combination of approaches:

See 'The 4 Pillars of Care'

The 4 Pillars of Care

Patient Education And Information To Support Self-Management

- Know your symptoms
- Ask Questions
- Reach out to support groups
- Maintain a low stress environment
- Follow all prescribed treatment plans
- Make sure that family and friends are educated about the nature of your condition

Pain Relief (Medication and Procedures)

- There are no drugs licensed to treat CRPS in the UK
- Patient and doctor should agree on treatment and be ready to re-evaluate if it proves ineffective
- Drug treatment can sometimes be effective in reducing CRPS pain and help you sleep
- Nerve pain can require very strong drugs that should be approached with caution

Physical and Vocational Rehabilitation

- Stay as mobile as possible
- Inactivity can compound the pain experience and lead to 'guarding' or disuse of the affected limb.
- Maintain motor function and mobility through exercise
- Physiotherapy (PT)
- Occupational Therapy (OT)

Psychological Interventions

- CRPS is not in your mind nor do your thoughts cause CRPS.
- The physical symptoms and nerve pain can cause fear and stress
- Many of the uncertainties related to what we know about CRPS can also produce feelings of fear, confusion, and loss of control.
- Working with a professional to discuss these feelings and learn methods to cope with them can be beneficial

Maintain frequent contact with your GP/Specialist

HELPFUL INFORMATION FOR PATIENTS

Action on Pain

www.action-on-pain.co.uk

Arthritis Research UK

<http://www.arthritisresearchuk.org/arthritis-information/conditions/complex-regional-pain-syndrome.aspx>

British Pain Society

www.britishpainsociety.org

Burning Nights

<http://www.chronicpaincrps.com/>

Disabled Living Foundation

www.dlf.org.uk

NHS Choices

<http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/complex-regional-pain-syndrome/pages/treatment.aspx>

National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke

http://www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/reflex_sympathetic_dystrophy/detail_reflex_sympathetic_dystrophy.htm

Patient

<http://www.patient.co.uk/doctor/complex-regional-pain-syndrome-pro>

Reflex Sympathetic Dystrophy Association (RSDSA)

<http://rsds.org/living-with-crps/>

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