

Reflex Sympathetic Dystrophy

What is Sympathetic Dystrophy?

Reflex sympathetic dystrophy (RSD), also called complex regional pain syndrome type I (CRPS I), is a painful nerve problem. It often occurs in the hand or foot after getting hurt. If untreated, the pain and weakness that RSD may cause can limit use of the injured region. But treatment can help you get better.

What Triggers RSD?

Getting injured may trigger RSD. It can be something minor, like a sprain or a cut. Or, it may be more severe, like a fracture. As you're healing, you may feel new, severe pain in the injured region. That pain may spread though the injured limb. Over time, other symptoms may appear.

Treating RDD

Treatment for RSD begins with therapy that teaches you ways to move the affected region. But if your pain prevents this therapy, you may have other treatment first. No matter what the treatment, the sooner you get it, the faster you'll get better.

Physical, Occupational, and Hand Therapy

Physical, occupational, and hand therapy aim to improve movement, build strength, and reduce pain in the affected region. The type of therapy you receive depends on the part of your body affected by RSD. In most cases, the goal of therapy is the same. You need to learn ways to use the affected region as normally as possible. For instance, if RSD affects your leg and foot, you may work with a therapist to walk more. Or, if you've lost some hand or arm use, you may learn exercises to regain some of that function.

Treatment also may include desensitization. This involves rubbing different textures on the injured region. Heat or cold also may be used. Treatment can help you get used to things touching your hand or foot. This may help reduce pain in the long term

Medical Treatment

Your doctor may suggest certain treatment for your symptoms. The goal is to reduce your pain and to get you moving again. Treatment may include:

- Oral medication to relieve pain
- Nerve blocks to stop pain signals
- Spinal cord stimulators to send electrical signals that block pain
- Sympathectomy to destroy a nerve that's causing pain

Other Treatment

RDS is complex and painful. You may feel depressed or angry about having it. Psychological therapy and RSD support groups can help you deal with those feelings. Other treatment also may help you cope. Biofeedback, for instance, can make you more aware of your body's pain signals. This may help you learn how to control pain and the stress it may cause.

Do You Have RSD?

Your doctor diagnoses reflex sympathetic dystrophy (RSD) based on your symptoms. Symptoms may first appear after you hurt your hand, arm, foot, or leg. But there's no way to tell if an injury will lead to RSD. And no one knows how or why it occurs.

Recognizing Symptoms and Signs

Symptoms and signs of RSD can begin right away or about 2 weeks after getting hurt. If you aren't treated soon, they can worsen or change over time. These symptoms and signs occur in the injured region:

Early-Stage RSD

- Severe, burning pain
- Sensitive to touch
- Swollen, reddish look
- Stiffening
- Warm and sweaty sensation

Late-Stage RSD

- Skin slowly withering (shriveling)
- Skin that becomes dry and shiny
- Loss of strength
- Strange hair growth
- Ridges in skin look flatter than normal

Living with RSD

You can change how RSD affects your life. Work with your doctor to find the best ways to treat RSD. Getting physical, occupational, and hand therapy as needed, using the affected region as much as you can, and having other treatment may bring relief. The sooner you treat RSD, the faster you may get better.