

Patient & Family Guide
2026

Complex Regional Pain Syndrome (CRPS)

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Complex Regional Pain Syndrome (CRPS)

What is CRPS?

Complex regional pain syndrome (CRPS) is a condition that causes pain symptoms that do not match the injury.

The cause of CRPS is not clearly understood and there is no single test that can diagnose the condition. Diagnosis is done by physical exam and a review of your medical history.

What causes CRPS?

CRPS can happen after:

- › Sprains and strains
- › Surgery
- › Trauma (like crush injuries, fractures, burns, amputation)
- › Nerve injuries
- › Stroke or heart attack
- › Infections

Signs and symptoms can include:

- A feeling of burning or throbbing pain that does not stop.
- Changes in skin colour – the skin in the affected area may look white, red, blue, or any combination of these. Your skin may also look shiny.
- Changes in skin temperature – from very warm to very cold.
- Sensitivity to cold or touch that would normally not cause pain.
- Swelling in the affected area.
- Changes to nail growth – the nails on the affected limb may grow faster or become dull, ridged, or brittle.
- Changes to hair growth in the affected area – the hair may grow darker, thicker, and faster in the affected area.
- Having a hard time moving the affected limb because of pain.

Symptoms of pain, swelling, redness, hypersensitivity, and changes in temperature happen first. Your symptoms may change over time.

Not moving your limb can lead to:

- › Muscle weakness
- › Atrophy (muscle loss)
- › Joint and muscle stiffness

After a long period of pain and suffering, you may see secondary psychological changes, such as:

- › Sleep disturbances
- › Anxiety
- › Depression

How is CRPS treated?

Medication

Your health care provider may recommend that you take medication to manage your symptoms. Talk to your health care provider about what would be best for you.

Medications that might be recommended include:

- › Pain relievers (including topical)
- › Antidepressants and anticonvulsants
- › Corticosteroids
- › Bone loss medications
- › Sympathetic nerve blocks
- › Vitamin C

Physiotherapy

Your health care provider will refer you to physiotherapy. The goal of treatment will be to lower your pain, get movement back, and return you to your previous level of activity, including work and leisure.

You and the physiotherapist will make a plan together and talk about treatment options.

Treatment may include:

- › Heat and/or cold
- › Immersion in water (aqua therapy)
- › Transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (TENS)
- › Acupuncture
- › Exercise for range of motion and strengthening
- › Weight-bearing exercises
- › Desensitizing the affected area (making sensation in the affected area normal)
- › Mirror therapy

Exercise can help with:

- › Pain relief and lowering stress
- › Improved joint flexibility and better muscle strength
- › Better bone density by putting weight on the affected limb

During your recovery, taking care of your physical and mental health is important.

- Pace your activities.
- Rest as needed.
- Keep doing normal activities as much as you can.
- Stay connected with friends and family.
- Take part in activities and hobbies that make you happy.

What are your questions?

Please ask a member of your health care team. We are here to help you.

Notes:

This pamphlet is for educational purposes only. It is not intended to replace the advice or professional judgment of a health care provider. The information may not apply to all situations. If you have any questions, please ask your health care provider.

Find all patient education resources here:
www.nshealth.ca/patient-education-resources

Connect with a registered nurse in Nova Scotia any time:
Call 811 or visit: <https://811.novascotia.ca>

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