

Complex Regional Pain Syndrome

CRPS is a chronic pain disorder that most commonly affects the hands or feet. The cause of CRPS is still not well understood, but is believed to be due to malfunction of the peripheral and central nervous systems. In more than 90% of cases, CRPS follows trauma or injury such as fractures, sprains/strains, soft tissue injury (such as burns, cuts, or bruises), limb immobilisation (such as being in a cast), or surgical/medical procedures.

Diagnosis of CRPS is based on the patient's signs and symptoms. It is characterised by prolonged pain, often described as "burning" and sometimes with associated pins and needles. The pain can often spread up the arm or leg. Other common symptoms include:

- Changes to skin texture e.g. shiny skin
- Abnormal sweating
- Changes in nail and hair growth and appearance
- Stiffness in affected joints
- Abnormal movement, often abnormal fixed postures

The recovery time of CRPS varies from person to person but most people will recover their function fully, especially teenagers and children. Early treatment is helpful in limiting the disorder. Treatment methods include exercise therapy, cognitive behavioural therapy, graded motor imagery (including mirror box therapy), and sometimes medications. Physiotherapy aims to desensitise the area, restore range of motion and strengthen the limb. It is important to consult your physiotherapist if you are experiencing any of these symptoms to ensure early resolution.

Table 2

Comparison of CRPS Types

Signs and Symptoms	CRPS Type 1	CRPS Type 2
Precipitating event	Sometimes	Yes
Single peripheral nerve involvement	Sometimes	Yes
Physiologic changes in affected limb	Yes	No
Cardinal signs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▮ Spontaneous pain ▮ Swelling ▮ Different skin temperatures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▮ Burning pain ▮ Allodynia ▮ Hyperalgesia
Progressive	Yes	Sometimes
Bone atrophy	Yes	No