

Reflex Sympathetic Dystrophy



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What Is Reflex 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.



While healing from a hand or foot injury, you may have unexpected pain when you should be feeling 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 through the injured limb. Over time, other symptoms may appear.

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



Treating RSD

Physical or occupational therapy is often the first way to treat RSD. 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 or Occupational Therapy

Physical or occupational therapy can improve movement, build strength, and reduce pain. You may receive some of these treatments:

Physical therapy is for the leg and foot. It may involve simply getting you to use your leg and foot as you would if you didn't have RSD. For instance, you may be asked to walk as much as you can.

Occupational therapy is also called "hand therapy." It may involve "stress loading" and other exercises. Stress loading helps you use the injured region. You also may be asked to use your hands as much as you can.

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



Making scrubbing motions is a common "stress loading" exercise for the hand.

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 medications** 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.



Biofeedback can help you manage pain.

Other Treatment

RSD 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.

Living with RSD



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

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