

What is palindromic rheumatism?

The term palindromic rheumatism (also known as 'palindromic arthritis') describes a form of joint pain that comes and goes in cycles, starting in one joint, perhaps moving to others before going away. It is not known what triggers attacks. Pain can last for a few hours or a few days (up to one or two weeks occasionally). Once the swelling and inflammation disappear, your joints go back to normal. There is usually no damage to the joints or surrounding areas. This is different to rheumatoid arthritis.

The number of joints affected and the amount of time they are inflamed will be different for everybody, with some people developing a regular pattern. Men and women are equally likely to be affected.

What are the symptoms of palindromic rheumatism?

- Attacks of pain that can be severe, stiffness and usually swelling in the affected joints.
- It is unpredictable. Many joints can be affected, including the hands, wrists, shoulders, ankles and feet. The joints in the hips, neck and jaw can also be affected, although less commonly.
- Tendons can become inflamed and painful.
- It may also affect the big toe in the same way as gout.
- Joints can feel hot and tender and look red.
- During a flare-up, some people feel very tired and have a slightly raised temperature.

REAL LIFE STORY

‘It started with pain in my fingers and thumb for two days. I thought I had injured or broken something. Over time this happened more often and after six weeks of almost constant pain I went to my doctor and asked for a referral. I then had to be very persistent and see a second consultant before I got a diagnosis.

My fingers, wrists, neck, elbows, shoulders and toes can all be affected. The pain never lasts more than a day or two before moving somewhere else. Then it dies down and I am fine for a few weeks. I find yoga meditation helpful. I know the pain will stop, but that can be hard to believe at the time. Online support groups are excellent because I can contact other people with the same condition.’

How will it affect me?

What usually happens is that one or two joints and the surrounding area quickly become very stiff, painful, and are usually swollen. Once the pain dies down in one joint, another one can flare up. This can happen to several joints before the

symptoms disappear for a while. It is hard to say how long attacks will last for. It can be a few hours, a few days, or a few weeks or longer.

Some people may have many years between attacks while others may have many attacks in one year. Sometimes you can wake up with a joint that has become very stiff and painful. At other times, these symptoms may come on suddenly during the day.

Nodules may occasionally appear under the skin of the joint that is affected. Unless they are painful, it is best to leave them alone. If they are painful, tell your doctor.

What is the outcome?

The good news is that your joints are unlikely to be damaged, because the inflammation moves around so much. Do not expect your symptoms to develop a clear pattern. About 1 in 10 people find that their symptoms eventually disappear. Between a half and a third of people who develop palindromic rheumatism have very occasional flare-ups. If proteins detected in blood tests are positive, such as rheumatoid factor (RF) or anti-CCP, rheumatoid arthritis is likely to develop. Between a half and a third of people with palindromic rheumatism will develop rheumatoid arthritis.

How is it diagnosed?

Palindromic rheumatism can be difficult to diagnose and usually takes longer because it is less well known and other types of arthritis will need to be considered. Blood tests (ESR: erythrocyte sedimentation rate and CRP: C-reactive protein) sometimes show increased levels of inflammation during attacks but the results can also be normal. Doctors will need to look at your medical history in detail. A pattern of short-term swelling that moves from joint to joint then disappears for a while needs to be identified.

What is the treatment?

One or more of the following drugs can be used – some will work better than others. Some people find that medication is ineffective.

- **Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs** (NSAIDs). Ibuprofen (Nurofen), diclofenac (Voltarol and others) are used at first to reduce inflammation and pain.
- **Steroids**. These are rarely used, but can be injected into a joint to quickly suppress inflammation if it is severe.
- **Disease-modifying anti-rheumatic drugs** (DMARDs). These include methotrexate, sulfasalazine and hydroxychloroquine which can be used if the symptoms are severe and last more than a few months.

Who will I see?

The first person to see is your GP. Make detailed notes of your symptoms in case there are some clues that might point to palindromic rheumatism, especially an unpredictable pattern of flare-ups affecting different joints. Because palindromic

rheumatism is not as well known, you may need to press for a diagnosis or a referral to a rheumatologist.

Is it hereditary?

It may be partly inherited through genes, but other factors are probably at work, including some kind of a trigger for the gene, perhaps bacteria or viruses. There is also a possibility that hormones may help to trigger it.

What can I do to help myself?

How to help yourself during an attack

- Your joints should be rested when the pain is most severe.
- Wrist splints and shoe insoles may be helpful.
- Ice packs and heat pads, sometimes used alternatively, can help to relieve joint pain and swelling. Do not use these if you have some numbness in the limb.
- If you are worried about side effects or are concerned that your medication is not working, ask your doctor for something different.
- Learn to pace yourself and find ways to conserve your energy.
- Learn relaxation exercises to help to reduce pain and improve your sleep.
- Swimming in a heated pool is especially good because the warm water can relax your joints and support your body.

How to manage the effects on your life

- Exercises will help to strengthen muscles and keep the joints moving once severe inflammation has subsided. It is important to get moving as soon as you can.
- Find support from other people with similar problems, such as on the Arthritis Care online discussion forums.
- Help your family and friends to understand how the attacks affect you, for example, by giving them this factsheet.
- Eat a healthy well-balanced diet rich in fresh fruit and vegetables.
- Stretching exercises are important for maintaining flexibility. You can learn how to do them from a physiotherapist, self-help books or CDs, or take up a form of exercise such as yoga or tai chi. Arthritis Care has a very practical booklet about exercise.
- Adapt your work to shorter hours, change to something less demanding, or make sure your workstation is comfortable. You may feel better if you can keep working.

Where can I get more information and support?

Arthritis Care is the UK's largest charity working with and for all people who have arthritis.

We are here to help you make positive choices through our information, website, self-management training, and professional helpline. Call the free helpline for confidential support on 0808 800 4050 (10am-4pm weekdays) or email: Helplines@arthritiscare.org.uk

You can find support from others with arthritis by joining our online discussion forums.

We rely on donations to fund our vital work in supporting people living with arthritis. If you would like to make a contribution, please phone us on 020 7380 6540 or you can donate online.

www.arthritiscare.org.uk

Our factsheets are reviewed every 18 months. Please check our website for up-to-date information and reference sources or call 020 7380 6577.

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Note

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Contact us

For confidential information and support about treatments, available care and adapting your life, contact the Arthritis Care Helpline

Freephone: 0808 800 4050

10am-4pm (weekdays)

Email: Helplines@arthritiscare.org.uk

For information about Arthritis Care and the services we offer, contact us at: **www.arthritiscare.org.uk**

You can also talk to other people who are living with arthritis, through the discussion forums on our website.

Arthritis Care UK office and England regional services:

Tel: 020 7380 6500

Central England email: CentralEngland@arthritiscare.org.uk

North England email: NorthEngland@arthritiscare.org.uk

South England email: SouthEngland@arthritiscare.org.uk

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Arthritis Care in Scotland

Tel: 0141 954 7776

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Arthritis Care in Wales

Tel: 029 2044 4155

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Other organisations

International Palindromic Rheumatism Society

www.palindromicrheumatism.org