

RSD

Reflex sympathetic dystrophy, also referred to as CRPS I, is an abnormality of the nerves that control pain, sweating, and temperature. This syndrome usually starts after an injury to the leg or foot. If untreated, it can become a chronic (long term) problem with pain and weakness that can limit the use of the injured foot. Appropriate treatment usually can help you get better.

Causes

Any injury can start RSD. It could be a minor (cut, sprain, bruise) or a major (fractures, crush injuries) injury. This injury affects the sympathetic part of the nervous system causing a type of "short circuit." The nerves then give inappropriate signals to the foot and brain. This results in unexpected pain out of proportion to the amount of injury, abnormal sweating, and temperature differences or intolerance to heat and cold. No one knows exactly how or why this happens.

Symptoms

Early signs and symptoms of RSD are severe burning pain much more severe than expected that the type of injury would indicate, extreme sensitivity to touching (hypersensitivity) of the foot, generalized swelling and reddish discoloration, a feeling of stiffness, warmth and excessive sweating. These symptoms could start soon after the injury or 2-3 weeks later. If untreated, the symptoms typically change or may worsen. In late (chronic) RSD, the skin may become dry, shiny, and thin looking. The skin ridges may look flattened. The foot and leg lose strength from lack of use. Hair growth may be abnormal. The pain usually is of a burning nature and hypersensitivity continues.

Diagnosis

The diagnosis of RSD is primarily based on your history (symptoms) and physical exam findings (signs). There is no single test that will definitely determine whether or not you have this syndrome. However, some tests may be helpful ruling out other causes of your symptoms (such as bone scans, MRIs, blood tests, etcetera). Also, sympathetic nerve blocks may not only help in diagnosing RSD, but can also help treat the syndrome.

Treatment

If it is determined that you have or are developing RSD, the following treatments may be used alone or in combination.

- Physical Therapy
 - To improve movement, increase strength, and reduce pain.
 - Range of motion exercises.
 - Muscle strengthening.
 - Encouraging normal use of the foot and ankle.
 - Desensitization by rubbing different textures on the skin. This may help to get used to touching the area and will ultimately lead to decreased pain.
- Contrast Baths
 - Promote increased blood flow to the area and may help the nerves that regulate the blood flow to work more normally.
- Medications
 - To decrease the discomfort.
 - Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAID) maybe help relieve pain and swelling.
 - Narcotics are sometimes used temporarily to control severe pain.
 - Antidepressants often help with night pain.
 - Nerve stabilizers may improve the nerve function.

Treatments

- Sympathetic Blocks
 - To block part of the nervous system that is not working right, hopefully allowing it to return to normal function.
 - This will usually significantly decrease the pain, but it may be for only a limited amount of time.

If the RSD does not respond to the above treatments, other more involved therapy may be necessary, but surgery is rarely indicated.

RSD can be a difficult and painful condition. You may feel depressed or sometimes angry and upset about having this condition. Sometimes psychological therapy and RSD support groups can help patients deal with the above feelings.

You should be an active participant in the treatment of your RSD and the sooner you treat this condition, the faster you may get better.