

Reactive Arthritis & You

What is it?



Reactive arthritis is a type of arthritis that typically occurs after an infection of the bowels or genitourinary tract. For some reason the infection triggers the arthritis.

This can happen 1 to 4 weeks after the infection. Reactive arthritis can also be triggered by a sexually transmitted infection (STI) such as chlamydia, gonorrhea, syphilis or HIV.

Reactive arthritis typically affects joints of the lower body including the feet, ankles, knees, hips and sometimes the lower back. Inflammation in the tendons may also occur. Reactive arthritis is usually acute (sudden onset, short-term), but it can also be chronic (long-term). Chronic forms can flare up and down.



Reactive arthritis is like a fire in your joints or tendons caused by inflammation

The inflammation caused by reactive arthritis is like a fire burning in your joints. If you were sitting in your living room and you noticed a fire on the stove, you would want to put it out right away before it spread. You wouldn't say "let's wait a little bit" until the fire spreads to the ceiling before trying to put it out. With reactive arthritis we want to put out the fire in your joints as quickly as possible, before there's permanent damage. We don't want to let it smoulder and get worse.

What is it going to do to me?



Reactive arthritis tends to start very quickly and can be very intense. The joints affected are usually stiff, swollen, painful, warm, and slightly red. Sometimes the toes can swell up like sausages (this is called dactylitis). Inflammation of the joints of the lower back can lead to back pain and stiffness.

At first, people can feel unwell, tired and feverish. They may have headaches or lose weight. These symptoms can also be due to the recent infection.

Other conditions can be associated with reactive arthritis such as inflammation of the eye (conjunctivitis). There may also be genital or urinary symptoms such as painful urination or pelvic pain in women.

In rare cases, a skin rash or sores on the mouth or nose may develop. You might notice nail changes. Some men get genital sores if they have reactive arthritis.

Visit RheumInfo.com



RheumInfo.com is a free educational website where you can learn more about reactive arthritis and treatments for the disease. The website is operated by Dr. Andy Thompson, a rheumatologist.

What can I do about it?



The first thing is don't panic. Take a deep breath. Although you might have been diagnosed with reactive arthritis, you are not alone. Luckily, there are effective treatments available that can make living with the condition much more comfortable. If you have reactive arthritis or think you may have it, your family doctor should refer you to a rheumatologist – a specialist who is an expert in treating arthritis.

Reactive arthritis is a serious disease that must be treated early and aggressively. It can eventually damage the joints if it is not adequately controlled. The first step is to treat your infection. Diarrheal and urinary tract infections are usually treated with antibiotics. Other types of medications might be required if you have an STI.

For acute attacks of reactive arthritis, corticosteroids can be very effective to control inflammation. These can be taken orally as pills (prednisone) or sometimes as cortisone injections directly into a joint. This type of treatment works quickly. It can reduce the pain and swelling in the joints. Non-Steroidal Anti-Inflammatory Drugs (NSAIDs) can also be used to reduce inflammation and pain caused by acute reactive arthritis.

For chronic reactive arthritis, Disease Modifying Anti-Rheumatic Drugs (DMARDs) can be effective. Examples are methotrexate and sulfasalazine. If these don't work, newer medications called anti-TNF biologics can be extremely effective.

Here are some other recommendations:

- **Learn as much as you can about the disease**
- **Attend your rheumatologist appointments regularly**
- **Learn about joint protection from a physiotherapist or occupational therapist**
- **Learn about the medications used to treat reactive arthritis**
- **Get tested for STIs and abstain from unprotected sex if your results are positive**