

Relapsing Polychondritis & You

What is it?



Relapsing polychondritis is a very rare autoimmune condition that causes inflammation of the cartilage. The most common tissues affected include the cartilage in the ears, nose, eyes, joints and respiratory tract.

The cause of relapsing polychondritis is not known. It's an autoimmune disease, which means for some reason, the body decides to mount an attack against its own cartilage.

Relapsing polychondritis can occur in people with other autoimmune conditions such as vasculitis, rheumatoid arthritis, thyroid disease or inflammatory bowel disease. It can also occur with other connective tissue diseases, or with cancer. Other times, relapsing polychondritis is not associated with other conditions.



Relapsing polychondritis can be mistaken for an infection

The connective tissue on the top part of the ear is the most common area affected by relapsing polychondritis. This area can become hot, red and very sore. Oftentimes the inflammation of the ear cartilage can be misdiagnosed as a type of skin infection called "cellulitis." If the inflammation does not go away after treatment with an antibiotic, chances are it's not cellulitis.

What is it going to do to me?



Inflammation of the cartilage is the hallmark symptom of relapsing polychondritis. The most common cartilage affected is on the top of the ears. One or both ears may become hot, red, and very sore. When multiple attacks affect the ear, it can sometimes make the top of the ear look a bit like cauliflower.

Relapsing polychondritis may also affect the cartilage over the bridge of the nose. This can result in an area that is painful and swollen over the bridge of the nose. Over time, the top of the nose may sink in and look a bit like a saddle. Cartilage in and around the eyes can also be inflamed.

Cartilage in the windpipe and bronchi can be affected by relapsing polychondritis, making it difficult to breathe. It can also cause a "barking seal like" chronic cough.

The joints are made up of cartilage and they can become inflamed and sometimes painful. The most common joints affected are the ones in the breastbone. This can make it difficult to breathe. In rare cases, the valves in the heart can be affected.

Relapsing polychondritis can cause significant fatigue. This is because the immune system is 'turned on' all the time.

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

What can I do about it?



Relapsing polychondritis is a very rare disorder. Although there is no cure for relapsing polychondritis, there are effective medications that can make living with the condition much more comfortable.

The signs and symptoms of relapsing polychondritis can vary from one person to another. Your treatment plan will be tailored to the symptoms that bother you. If your relapsing polychondritis is associated with another autoimmune or connective tissue disorder, it is important to treat these.

Medications called non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) can reduce inflammation in the ears, nose and joints. When NSAIDs are not enough, prednisone may help. For some patients, medications called disease-modifying anti-rheumatic drugs (DMARDs) may be prescribed.

Here are some other recommendations on what you should do:

- **Learn as much as you can about the condition**
- **Ensure associated conditions are treated and controlled**
- **If you are a smoker, it is important to quit**
- **Learn about the medications used to treat relapsing polychondritis**