

Viral Arthritis & You

What is it?



Viral arthritis is a type of arthritis that occurs after an infection with a virus. It can affect many joints in the body. This disease comes on quickly, causing intense swelling and pain in the joints affected. The disease often goes away after several weeks, but it can sometimes persist for months.

There are many infections that can cause viral arthritis. Some examples include:

- **Epstein-Barr virus (EBV) that causes mononucleosis (“mono”)**
- **Parvovirus B19 that causes fifth disease**
- **Hepatitis B & C viruses**
- **HIV**

Viral arthritis can affect anyone, but it is more common in women and younger adults.



Viral arthritis is like a bull in a china shop

Viral arthritis “behaves” like a bull in china shop. It comes on quickly and the pain can be intense. It is important to manage the pain and inflammation caused by the disease. Fortunately, patients usually start to see improvement quickly. The disease is usually self-limiting – it will go away. Viral arthritis may only last for a few weeks, but in some cases, it can persist for a few months.

What is it going to do to me?



The onset of viral arthritis is acute, meaning it tends to come on quickly. It can be intense and very painful. Viral arthritis usually causes inflammation of the small joints in the hands, wrists, ankles and elbows. The arthritis can “jump” from joint to joint. It usually affects joints on both sides of the body.

The word inflammation comes from the Latin word *inflammare*, which means to light on fire. In people with viral arthritis, inflammation causes the joints to become swollen, stiff and painful. In other words, the joints can feel like they’re “on fire.”

The viral infection may cause people to feel generally unwell, achy, tired and feverish. They may have a loss of appetite and weight loss. In some cases, a rash can occur on the skin.

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

What can I do about it?



The onset of viral arthritis can be dramatic. The first thing is don't panic. Take a deep breath. Viral arthritis is usually self-limiting, meaning it will go away on its own. Treatment is often targeted to controlling the symptoms to make you feel more comfortable. Improvement is usually seen within 2 weeks, though it can take a few months before you feel back to normal.

You should see your family doctor if you think you have viral arthritis. It can be a difficult disease to diagnose. Your doctor might refer you to a rheumatologist – a specialist who is an expert in treating arthritis.

Treatment for symptoms of viral arthritis often requires a combination of medications. During acute attacks, corticosteroids such as prednisone can be very effective to control inflammation, pain and swelling. Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) are sometimes used to reduce joint inflammation and pain. Simple pain relievers such as acetaminophen (Tylenol) may be sufficient for managing the pain caused by viral arthritis. When non-prescription analgesics and NSAIDs are not enough to control pain, stronger medicines called opioids may be used.

Often, more than one type of medication is needed to control the pain and inflammation of viral arthritis.

Here are some other recommendations on what you should do:

- **Learn as much as you can about the disease**
- **Attend your medical appointments regularly**
- **Learn about joint protection from a physiotherapist or occupational therapist**
- **Learn about the medications used to treat viral arthritis**