

Understanding Psoriatic Arthritis

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What is psoriatic arthritis?

Psoriatic arthritis (PsA) is a chronic (long-term) condition, which causes inflammation of the joints commonly in combination with a skin condition called psoriasis. PsA usually affects the fingers, toes, wrists, ankles and knees. It can also affect the spine and sacroiliac joints (the joints of the lower back between the spine and the pelvis). The nails on the hands and feet may develop small holes and lift from the nail bed.



What are the symptoms?

Psoriatic arthritis (PsA) occurs when tendons (which attach muscles to bones) and ligaments (which connect one bone to the next) around joints become inflamed. This can cause:

- Erosions of the bone at the site of attachment
- Inflammation and swelling of nearby soft tissues (including the membrane lining the joint called the synovium)
- Accumulation of fluid inside and outside joints. This makes affected joints swollen, hot and sore.

Psoriasis causes an inflammatory rash, most commonly on the elbows, knees and scalp. The skin rash of psoriasis is usually present in patients for several years before the onset of PsA, if it occurs.

Infrequently, there may be no evidence of psoriasis when PsA begins; in some people it may develop at a later time. The rash can vary in shape and size, and usually has a grey or silver scaly surface. The combination of joint pain and skin symptoms can make PsA difficult to manage, particularly as these two types of symptoms may not occur together.

'SAUSAGE' TOES AND FINGERS (DACTYLITIS)



PITTING AND DISCOLOURATION OF THE NAILS



PSORIASIS RASH ON HAND AND FOOT



What causes psoriatic arthritis?

PsA is known as an inflammatory disorder or autoimmune disease. It occurs when the body's immune system becomes overactive and attacks the body's own tissues. Normally, the immune system protects the body from invasion of germs and also repairs damage. However, when someone has PsA their immune system causes inflammation in the joints and skin.

The exact cause of this defect in the immune system in both PsA and psoriasis is not known. However, it may be hereditary as both conditions tend to run in families. Other possible causes or triggers include exposure to infection, stress or changes in a person's environment. In women, there appears to be an increased risk of PsA following pregnancy and menopause.

Important facts

- PsA is a fairly uncommon form of arthritis¹
- Only 1.5 out of 10 people with psoriasis develop PsA,² but arthritis may be underdiagnosed in the psoriasis population¹



- Only 6–18% develop the arthritis before the psoriasis¹
- While PsA can arise at any age, it usually develops at around 40–50 years¹
- If left untreated, PsA can result in permanent joint and bone damage

Helpful contacts

Local resources

If you are living with an inflammatory joint disease, there are many organisations you can call upon. Some offer information and advice; others provide counselling or advocacy. Many have local branches so that you can access resources and support networks near you.



Arthritis Australia

www.arthritisaustralia.com.au

Freecall: 1800 011 041

Empowered – Arthritis Australia

www.empowered.org.au



Health Direct Australia

www.healthdirect.gov.au

International resources

Many international organisations also offer useful resources and information, but please remember that some treatments, advice and services offered overseas may not be relevant in Australia.



Creaky Joints

www.creakyjoints.org



Dragon Claw

www.dragonclaw.net



References: 1. Liu J-T et al. *World J Orth* 2014;5(4):537–543. 2. Arthritis Australia Empowered website. 2015. Psoriatic Arthritis. Available at: <https://empowered.org.au/psoriatic-arthritis/> (accessed 22/8/18).

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