

Complex Regional Pain Syndrome (CRPS)

CRPS affects 5000 people in Australia per year. If you suspect your child is struggling with CRPS, it's important to ask an experienced health professional for advice and avoid misinformation online.

What is CRPS?

CRPS can occur in children and adults. It is most common in adolescent girls or older women and usually affects an arm or a leg.

It can happen after a sprain, fracture, or surgery where the pain continues after healing. Sometimes, it happens after being in a cast or from a small bump or no injury at all. The cause of CRPS is not fully known.

Symptoms can include pain that is worse than the original injury, pain from things that do not usually hurt (e.g. touch, swelling, changes in skin, temperature and colour, and later, changes in skin, hair growth, joint stiffness and muscle movements).

How is CRPS diagnosed?

CRPS can be difficult to detect and the cause remains unknown.

To diagnose the condition, the health professional may consider a variety of symptoms and signs including: response to touch or movement, differences in skin, swelling or sweating, decreased or weakened movement. These are called the Budapest Criteria (refer Figure 1).

People with CRPS can feel scared, sad, angry, frustrated or depressed. It is normal for those with CRPS to be flooded with big emotions or feel overwhelmed. Know there is always support available and you are not alone.

A team of healthcare professionals can assist families to understand and manage their child's emotions.

The Budapest Criteria

1. Sensory changes

Pain with normally non-painful sensations such as touch, temperature, or movement (*Allodynia*) Increased pain intensity (*Hyperalgesia*)

2. Temperature/sweating changes

(*Vasomotor*). Differences between different sides of the body in skin temperature (greater than 1°C) OR colour.

3. Sweating and swelling changes

(*Sudomotor/Oedema*) Changes or differences between different sides of the body in swelling AND/OR sweating.

4. Motor control and growth changes

Decreased movement, mobility, weakness or tremors (motor symptoms). Changes in hair, skin, or nails (trophic changes).

Figure 1.

Manage CRPS with treatment

It is important to get diagnosed early so treatment can start.

The important thing is getting started and to work out a treatment plan with the care team. By connecting with a physiotherapist or occupational therapist, your child can learn about the condition, effective coping and strengthening exercises and get back to daily activities.



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A slow and steady approach

While there is no quick cure for CRPS yet, there are lots of ways to manage the condition and return to normal activities.

Even though it is hard and sore, your child starts by moving “slow and steady” and normal touching of the sore arm or leg, with cotton wool and moisturiser cream and getting clothes over it again. This helps reset their nervous system pathways, lessening the sensitivity and making their arm or leg feel more comfortable. This allows your child the best chance to recover from this condition.

It's also recommended to speak with a psychologist to help you and your child understand and regulate the big emotions that come up.

Moving forward

Most cases of CRPS improve and recover. The pain and other symptoms can go away.

Sometimes the symptoms come back (relapse) but this can be managed with the same treatment strategies and get better faster. The chance of full recovery (remission) is better in children than in adults.

Specialist children's pain clinics

Specialist children's pain clinics helps children and young people learn to understand and respond to their pain in a constructive way, including how:

- the brain and body are connected
- our thoughts, feelings, and actions can change our pain
- pain can change our thoughts, feelings, and actions.

The clinics also help them think about how pain can affect relationships and how we connect with others.

Key points

- 1. Find a physiotherapist**, occupational or hand therapist to help your child start moving, build strength and endurance, and recover faster.
- 2. Contact a psychologist** to learn ways to support your child in managing their pain. The team can teach your child how to cope with any fear or anxiety they may have.
- 3. Help the body adjust to sensations**—start with something gentle like massage cream or cooling putty on areas that don't hurt. Then slowly move to the sore part of the arm or leg. This helps retrain the nerves and brain.
- 4. Move the body part**—your child can start by resting their arm or leg on a pillow or soft toy. They could also try gently moving the sore limb in warm or cool water to help the nerves remember what feels normal.
- 5. Using medication**—while medications are not a cure, they can help with sensitivity, swelling, stiffness and sleep. Over-the-counter medicines like Ibuprofen and antioxidants like Vitamin C are sometimes used. Your child's doctor can help find the best options for prescription medication.
- 6. Know that your child can get better.**

