



Psoriatic arthritis (PsA)

- Psoriatic arthritis (PsA) causes pain and swelling in your joints
- It's usually associated with the skin condition psoriasis, but it can occur in people without psoriasis
- There's no cure, but it can be managed with early and ongoing treatment

Psoriatic arthritis is a chronic (ongoing) health condition that causes pain, stiffness and swelling in your joints.

It's the result of your immune system working in a faulty way.

Our immune systems are designed to look out for and attack foreign bodies – like bacteria and viruses – that can make us sick. For reasons that we don't fully understand, when you have PsA, your immune system gets confused and attacks your joints and healthy tissues as if they were foreign bodies. This causes ongoing inflammation and pain. It also causes the rapid build-up of skin cells, resulting in the scaly rash we know as psoriasis.

PsA affects both men and women and can occur at any age. To better understand your condition, it's helpful to know some basic information about your joints and skin.

Your joints

Joints are places where bones meet. Bones, muscles, ligaments and tendons all work together so that you can bend, twist, stretch and move about.

The ends of your bones are covered in a thin layer of cartilage. It acts like a slippery cushion absorbing shock and helping your joints move smoothly.

The joint is wrapped inside a tough capsule filled with fluid. It lubricates and nourishes the cartilage and other structures in the joint.

Ligaments hold the joint together by joining one bone to another. Your muscles are attached to the bones by tendons. As your muscles contract, they pull on the bones to make the joint move.

Entheses are the tissues that connect your ligaments or tendons to your bones.

When the immune system attacks the joints, this causes a build-up of fluid and inflammation of the tissues that line the joint. This causes pain, heat and swelling. Joints can become stiff and painful to move.

Ligaments, tendons and entheses can also be affected and become inflamed and painful.

Your skin

Your skin is constantly changing. Every 28-30 days your body creates new skin cells sheds the old cells.

When you have psoriasis, this cycle occurs much more quickly. New skin cells appear within 3-4 days, but your body hasn't removed the old ones.

This leads to the build-up of skin cells as raised, scaly skin patches.

Symptoms

There are several types of PsA. The symptoms you experience will depend on the type you have and the severity of your condition.

You may experience some of the following:

- swelling, pain and heat in your joints
- joint stiffness, especially in the morning
- scaly skin patches (psoriasis)
- persistent mental and physical tiredness, or fatigue
- inflammation of your entheses (enthesitis), often at the heel
- small dents (pitting) in your fingernails and toenails
- back pain
- swollen fingers caused by inflammation of the tendon in the fingers or toes
- inflammation of the eyes, causing eye pain and redness.

Symptoms may change from day to day. At times your symptoms, such as pain, fatigue and inflammation, can become more intense. This is called a flare. Flares are unpredictable and can seem to happen for no reason.

Cause

We don't know what causes the immune system to malfunction, but your genes may play a role.

Some people with PsA have the gene called HLA-B27. However, this gene can also be found in people who don't have PsA.

Other factors such as an infection, accident or injury may trigger the condition in people already at risk because of their genes.

Psoriatic arthritis can occur at any age but usually appears in adults between 30-50 years. It affects both men and women.

Diagnosis

There's no single medical test that will diagnose PsA. And the symptoms of psoriatic arthritis can resemble other types of arthritis such as rheumatoid arthritis, gout and osteoarthritis.

Your doctor will diagnose your condition using a combination of exams and tests, including:

- discussing your symptoms and medical history with you
- a physical examination of your joints, skin and nails to look for any signs of change, including inflammation, rashes, nail pitting
- blood tests that highlight the presence of inflammation or particular genes (e.g. HLA-B27).

Test results also help rule out other conditions that may have similar symptoms.

Seek advice early for PsA

If you're experiencing joint pain and inflammation, it's important you discuss your symptoms with your doctor.

Getting a diagnosis as soon as possible means that treatment can start quickly. Early treatment will help control joint and skin inflammation, manage pain more effectively and reduce your risk of joint damage.

If you're diagnosed with PsA, you may be referred to a specialist doctor who treats joint, muscle and bone conditions. They're called a rheumatologist. You may also be referred to a doctor who specialises in skin conditions, such as psoriasis. They're called a dermatologist.

Treatment

While there's no cure for PsA, there are many strategies to help manage your condition and symptoms so you can continue to lead a healthy and active life.

Medicines

Your doctor or specialist may prescribe several different medicines depending on your symptoms and the severity of your condition.

You may take one medicine or a combination of different medicines, including:

- pain relievers (or analgesics) - for short-term pain relief
- non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) - to control inflammation and provide short-term pain relief
- corticosteroids - to quickly manage or reduce inflammation
- disease-modifying anti-rheumatic drugs (DMARDs) – to control your overactive immune system
- biologics and biosimilars (bDMARDs) - are biological disease-modifying drugs that target specific parts of your immune system.
- skin treatments— there are various options to help you manage your psoriasis. You'll usually start with ointments and creams. If these don't work effectively, your doctor may recommend tablets and/or ultraviolet (UV) light therapy.

Self-management

There are other things you can do to help yourself:

Learn more about your condition – knowing as much as possible about your PsA means that you can make informed decisions about your healthcare and play an active role in managing it.

Exercise – will help you maintain muscle strength and joint flexibility, build up stamina and help you manage your pain. Talk with a physiotherapist or an exercise physiologist for specific advice about an exercise program to suit your needs.

See a physiotherapist – for hands-on treatment to relieve your pain and keep you moving. They also provide information and advice on how you can modify your activities, manage pain and exercise safely.

Talk to an OT – an occupational therapist, or OT, can give advice on pacing yourself and managing fatigue, and how to modify daily activities both at home and work to reduce strain and pain on affected joints.

Try relaxation techniques – muscle relaxation, distraction, guided imagery and other techniques can help you manage pain and difficult emotions such as anxiety and can help you get to sleep.

Use aids and other equipment – supports such as walking aids, specialised cooking utensils, ergonomic computer equipment and long-handled shoe horns can reduce pain and fatigue. An occupational therapist can advise you on aids and equipment.

Rest – can help you manage fatigue and is particularly important when your joints are swollen.

Stay at work – it's good for your health and wellbeing. Talk to your doctor or healthcare team about things you can do to stay at work or get back to work.

Eat well – while there's no specific diet for people with PsA, it's important to have a healthy, balanced diet to maintain general health and prevent weight gain and other medical problems, such as diabetes and heart disease.

Look after your heart - research shows that people with PsA are more at risk of developing heart disease. So if you smoke, quit. Get active and move. Eat a healthy diet. Drink alcohol in moderation. And discuss your risk with your doctor.

Complementary therapies – treatments such as massage or meditation may be helpful. Talk with your doctor or rheumatologist before starting any treatment.

Joint surgery

People with PsA rarely need surgery.

However it may be necessary if a joint is very painful or there's a risk of losing joint function, or if a tendon has become damaged and needs to be repaired.

In this case, your doctor will refer you to a surgeon who specialises in treating bones, joints, ligaments, tendons and muscles. This is an orthopaedic surgeon.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Rheumatologist
- Dermatologist
- Physiotherapist
- Exercise physiologist
- Occupational therapist
- Musculoskeletal Australia
www.msk.org.au
MSK Help Line: 1800 263 265

How we can help

Call our MSK Help Line and speak to our nurses. Phone 1800 263 265 or email helpline@msk.org.au.

We can help you find out more about:

- psoriatic arthritis
- ways to live well
- managing your pain
- upcoming webinars, seminars and other events.

More to explore

- Better Health Channel
www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au
- Australian Physiotherapy Association
www.physiotherapy.asn.au
- Exercise and Sports Science Australia
www.essa.org.au
- Medicines Line - Tel. 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424) www.nps.org.au
- Occupational Therapy Australia
www.otaus.com.au

This resource was developed with funding from Novartis.

