



Reflex Sympathetic Dystrophy (RSD)

What is RSD?

Reflex Sympathetic Dystrophy is a chronic pain disorder involving the sympathetic nervous system. It usually is the result of an injury or trauma, but can also be a complication of surgery, infection, casting or splinting and myocardial infarction (heart attack). The trauma sets off the body's mechanism for pain recognition, but then the "normal system of pain perception" begins to misfire and an abnormal cycle of intractable pain begins. As RSD progresses, the abnormal pain of the sympathetic nervous system has an effect on other areas of the body and can result in total disability as muscles, bones, skin and the autonomic immune system become involved. The first indication of RSD is prolonged intractable pain usually more severe than the injury. The symptoms are chronic burning pain in a localized area, intense sensitivity to temperature and light touch and a color change to the skin.

Most physicians agree that there are three stages of RSD, which progress at a different pace in each person. Initially, there is swelling and redness in the affected area. Next, the area may become blue and cold, with increased pain and stiffness of ligaments and joints, and Osteoporosis may become evident. Finally, there may be a wasting of affected muscles, contraction of tendons and a definite withering of the affected limb. In all of the stages, severe chronic pain continues to be a major complaint. Depression can accompany the life changes of RSD and psychological therapy may help.

Clinical symptoms of RSD

Pain is the first and primary complaint described as extremely severe burning or aching. Swelling and joint tenderness. Edema in the area of pain may be hard or pitted joints may be stiff and hard to initiate movement. Loss or diminished motor function pain may cause a decrease in movement of the extremities. Decreased mobility can lead to atrophy or wasting of muscles. Changes in skin temperature and color. Skin temperature can change from warm to cool or cold to hot. Skin color may be red, bluish or a mottled appearance and may be shiny or dry. Increased sweating at injured area.

How is RSD Treated?

- Drug Therapy
- Nerve Blocks
- Physical Therapy
- Transcutaneous Electrical Stimulator
- Implantable devices: Spinal Cord Stimulator, Drug Delivery Infusion Pump, Sympathectomy