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Complex Regional Pain Syndrome (CRPS) formerly Reflex Sympathetic Dystrophy (RSD)

Complex Regional Pain Syndrome (CRPS), formerly known as Reflex Sympathetic Dystrophy, is a neurologic condition that can be difficult to diagnosis, but often causes pain in a patient.

Most commonly, pain involves the arm or leg, and is usually precipitated by an injury such as trauma or surgery. Simplified, the injury causes a sensitization of the nerve endings resulting in persistent pain even after the injury had time to heal.

The hallmark of this medical condition is pain, swelling, redness, warmth or coolness. Since the symptoms of CRPS are similar to other medical conditions, such as a broken bone, CRPS is hard to diagnosis early and correctly. One study reports that the average number of physicians seen by the patient before correctly receiving the diagnosis of CRPS is 5.

In addition, the patient has exquisite discomfort from light touch. Patients report the inability to sleep with a blanket or bed sheet over their afflicted extremity. Additional findings include fingernail/toenail damage, skin color changes, loss of range of motion, sweating, and excessive hair growth.

Diagnostic imaging such as x-rays can show reduced bone density and a triple phase nuclear bone scan can show increased blood flow to the area. However, these tests are not statistically sensitive, and both tests have been reported to be less than 50% sensitive. In other words, even if the tests are negative for CRPS, it does not mean the patient does not have the condition.

I cannot emphasize enough that CRPS is a diagnosis based on a history and physical examination. Although medical imaging can be useful, it is not needed to make the diagnosis.

Current treatments include nerve pain alleviating medications, nerve blocks of the extremities, and physical/occupational therapy are helpful to treat the pain. Each patient responds to treatment differently, and success is sometimes difficult to estimate. However, if diagnosed early and correctly, the probability to prevent chronic pain are improved.

The doctors at the Illinois Pain Institute recommend that you see an interventional pain specialist after two weeks of symptoms of pain, numbness, and/or hypersensitivity to an affected limb. The rehabilitation of patients with pain should begin early. This process is important to prevent chronic pain, to promote healing of the body, and to prevent further muscle and nerve damage.