

What Is Reactive Arthritis?

Fast Facts: An Easy-to-Read Series of Publications for the Public

Reactive arthritis is joint inflammation that is a "reaction" to an infection in your body. "Inflammation" is the way tissues react to injury or disease. It can cause swelling, redness, heat, and pain. Besides inflamed joints, reactive arthritis can have two other symptoms: red and inflamed eyes and an inflamed urinary tract. These symptoms may occur alone, together, or not at all.

What Causes Reactive Arthritis?

Sometimes, reactive arthritis is set off by an infection in the bladder, which holds urine, or the urethra, which carries urine out of the body. In women, an infection in the vagina can spark the reaction. For both men and women, it can start with bacteria passed on during sex. Another form of reactive arthritis starts with eating food or handling something that has bacteria on it.

Doctors do not know why some people develop reactive arthritis and others do not. Your genes (passed from parent to child) could increase the chances of getting the disease.

Is Reactive Arthritis Contagious?

Reactive arthritis is not contagious. If you have the disorder, you cannot pass it on to someone else. However, the bacteria that can trigger the disease can be passed from person to person.

Who Gets Reactive Arthritis?

Men between ages 20 and 40 are most likely to get reactive arthritis. Men are also more likely than women to get the form that is caused by sexually acquired infections. Women and men are at equal risk of getting the disease because of a food-borne infection. Women with reactive arthritis often have milder symptoms than men.

What Are the Symptoms of Reactive Arthritis?

Reactive arthritis often causes inflammation of the urinary and genital tract, joints, and eyes. Less common are mouth sores and skin rashes. Symptoms may be so mild that you do not notice them. They can come and go over a period of weeks or months. In a few people, symptoms can turn into a long-term disease

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How Is Reactive Arthritis Diagnosed?

There is no specific lab test to confirm that a person has this disorder. Doctors sometimes find it difficult to diagnose. Tests the doctor may order include:

- Complete medical history.
- Blood tests.
- Tests for infections.
- X rays.

What Type of Doctor Treats Reactive Arthritis?

If you have reactive arthritis, you will probably see several different types of doctors. This is because the disease affects various parts of the body. It is helpful if a doctor called a rheumatologist oversees your treatment. This type of doctor specializes in arthritis. He or she can coordinate treatments and monitor side effects from all the medicines you may take. Other types of doctors can treat some of the symptoms:

- Ophthalmologist—treats eye disease.
- Gynecologist—treats genital symptoms in women.
- Urologist—treats genital symptoms in men and women.
- Dermatologist—treats skin symptoms.
- Orthopaedist—performs surgery on severely damaged joints.
- Physiatrist—supervises exercise regimens.

How Is Reactive Arthritis Treated?

There is no cure for reactive arthritis, but some treatments ease the symptoms. The doctor might use one or more of the following:

- Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs).
- Corticosteroid injections.
- Topical corticosteroids (cream or lotion).
- Antibiotics.
- Medicines to suppress the immune system.
- Medicines called “biologics” that suppress one of the proteins involved in the body’s immune response.
- Exercise.

What Can People Who Have Reactive Arthritis Expect?

Most people with reactive arthritis recover fully from the first flare of symptoms. These people can return to regular activities 2 to 6 months later. About 20 percent of people with this illness will have

long-term, usually mild, arthritis. Back pain and arthritis are the symptoms that most often come back. A few patients will have long-term, severe arthritis that is hard to treat and may cause joint damage.

What Are Researchers Learning About Reactive Arthritis?

Scientists are trying to find the causes of reactive arthritis. They are also looking for new treatments. Through research, they are:

- Figuring out the relationship between infection and reactive arthritis. How and why does an infection set off arthritis? Why do some people with infections get reactive arthritis and others do not?
- Studying why people with certain genes are more at risk than others.
- Coming up with ways to find the bacteria in the body that start the reaction.
- Testing combinations of treatments for reactive arthritis. For example, they are testing the use of antibiotics in combination with biologics and other medicines.

For More Information About Reactive Arthritis and Other Related Conditions:

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The information in this fact sheet was summarized in easy-to-read format from information in a more detailed NIAMS publication. To order the Reactive Arthritis Q&A full-text version, please contact the NIAMS using the contact information above. To view the complete text or to order online, visit www.niams.nih.gov.

For Your Information

This publication may contain information about medications used to treat the health condition discussed here. When this publication was developed, we included the most up-to-date (accurate) information available. Occasionally, new information on medication is released.

For updates and for any questions about any medications you are taking, please contact the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) toll free at 888–INFO–FDA (888–463–6332) or visit its website at www.fda.gov. For additional information on specific medications, visit Drugs@FDA at www.accessdata.fda.gov/scripts/cder/drugsatfda. Drugs@FDA is a searchable catalog of FDA-approved drug products.