



Reactive arthritis



What is reactive arthritis?

Reactive arthritis is a condition that causes inflammation in various places in the body. It usually develops after a viral or bacterial infection, and occurs when the immune system overreacts and attacks the body. Reactive arthritis can occur at any age, but it is most common in adults aged 20-40. The condition is more common in men.

Reactive arthritis (formerly called Reiter's syndrome) can be caused by various infections. In the past, food poisoning and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) were recognised to cause the condition. Nowadays, other causes are recognised, such as glandular fever. Slapped cheek syndrome (also called fifth disease or parvovirus B19) can also cause inflammation of the joints. This should be considered if contacts or family members, especially children, have had this infection recently. For a minority of people, no cause can be identified.

Reactive arthritis is not caused directly by an infection in the joints: it is a reaction to an infection elsewhere in the body. While the main symptoms are inflamed and painful joints, there may be inflammation and sticky discharge from the eyes, and inflammation and discharge from the urethra (the tube that carries urine from the bladder).

The severity of reactive arthritis varies widely — from joint swelling, mild fever and a few weeks of discomfort, through to more severe symptoms lasting 12 months or more. The severity of the initial infection is not related to the severity of the arthritis.

How will it affect me?

You may see symptoms come on very suddenly; however, it is more usual for them to develop over the course of a few days, or longer. When the joint inflammation is active, it may make you feel tired and generally unwell.

What is the treatment?

Antibiotics can be used to treat the initial infection. The arthritis itself can be treated by one or more of the following drugs:

- **Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs)** are used to reduce pain and inflammation. Examples include forms of ibuprofen (such as Nurofen) and diclofenac (such as Voltarol).
- **Intra-muscular or oral steroids.** These can quickly suppress inflammation if it is severe. They can be injected directly into the joints if only a few are affected, or given orally if many joints are inflamed. While steroids are very effective at reducing pain and inflammation, they have side effects if used long term.
- **Disease-modifying anti-rheumatic drugs (DMARDs).** These include methotrexate (such as Maxtrex) and sulfasalazine (such as Salazopyrin) and can be used if the symptoms are severe and last more than a few months.

Symptoms come in five groups

- **Joints and tendons:** The joints affected will vary – hips, knees, ankles, feet and toes are the most commonly affected and become swollen and painful. Tendons can become inflamed, such as the Achilles tendon at the back of your ankle. Low back and buttock pain can occur. Your wrists, fingers and elbows can also be affected.
- **Eyes:** These can become red and inflamed, with a mucus discharge (conjunctivitis). In more serious cases, the inner eye can become inflamed, causing pain and blurred vision (uveitis). It is important to detect and treat this early.
- **Genitourinary:** You may experience a discharge of fluid from the penis or vagina. A less common symptom is blood in urine.
- **Skin:** Scaly skin rashes sometimes develop over your hands or feet.
- **Whole body:** Fever, weight loss, diarrhoea, feeling like you may have the flu, and mouth ulcers often occur alongside the other symptoms.

Effects of reactive arthritis

For most people, reactive arthritis is temporary and will last less than 12 months. You will probably be able to start returning to normal activities after three to six months. There is usually no lasting joint damage. Once symptoms start to ease, they often come and go, with some days better than others. You can also have periods where symptoms go away completely and then come back. A small minority of people will develop long-term arthritis. If this occurs, the treatment will be same as for those who have inflammatory arthritis.

Relapses can be caused by another similar infection, so it is important to reduce the risk of food poisoning and STIs as much as possible.

Who do I speak to?

If you have any of the symptoms listed earlier in this factsheet, the first thing you should do is make an appointment with your GP. Make detailed notes of your symptoms because there are some clues that might point to reactive arthritis, especially if you can remember any infection in the weeks before, however mild.

If you have got reactive arthritis, you may need a referral to a rheumatologist. Physiotherapists can also be very helpful for moving the affected joints and strengthening the muscles.



What can I do to help myself?

You may need to rest your joints when the pain and inflammation is at its most severe.

- Wrist splints and shoe insoles may be helpful in the short term.
- Ice packs and heat pads, sometimes used alternately, can help to relieve joint pain and swelling.
- Finding the medication that works best for you can take time. If you are worried about side effects or are concerned that your medication is not working, ask your doctor for something different.
- Pace yourself and find ways to conserve your energy.
- Learn relaxation exercises to help reduce pain and improve your sleep.
- Find support from other people with similar problems on the Arthritis Care Online Community.
- Help your family and friends to understand how reactive arthritis affects you - for example, by giving them this factsheet.
- Exercises will help to strengthen muscles and keep the joints moving once the severe inflammation has subsided. It is important to keep mobile.
- Stretching exercises are important for regaining flexibility. You could speak to a physiotherapist for tips on suitable exercises, or you could join a yoga or tai chi class. See Arthritis Care's 'Exercise and Arthritis' booklet for more information on appropriate exercises.
- Swimming in a heated pool is especially good because the warm water can soothe and support your body at the same time.
- You could change your working pattern (to part-time or hours that better suit you) or modify your work station. You could perhaps take on a less demanding role.

Exercising may be difficult at first and make you feel tired. Just do a small amount to begin with and gradually build up - do not overdo it. Starting with 10 minutes a day can help.

Is it hereditary?

People with a gene called HLA-B27 may be more susceptible to developing reactive arthritis. About three-quarters of those who develop reactive arthritis have this gene.



ARTHRITIS CARE

How Arthritis Care can help you

Want to talk to someone about your arthritis?
Or read more about the condition?

Call our free, confidential Helpline on 0808 800 4050 for information and support. We're open weekdays from 09:30 to 17:00 – we'd really like to hear from you.

We have over 40 free booklets and factsheets on various aspects of arthritis, from diet and surgery, to managing pain and fatigue.

These can be sent to you in the post – just ask our Helpline staff for details.

Go online

You can download all our booklets and factsheets as PDFs from arthritiscare.org.uk/information

We also have an Online Community, where you can chat to others with arthritis, and can be reached at arthritiscareforum.org.uk



Arthritis Care and Arthritis Research UK have joined together to help more people live well with arthritis. Read how at arthritisresearchuk.org/merger. All donations will now go to Arthritis Research UK and be used to help people with arthritis live full and active lives in communities across England and Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland.

Registered Charity Number 207711, SC041156.

Thank you

Note This information sheet may be photocopied and distributed freely on the condition that it is reproduced in its entirety and that it is not quoted without acknowledgement.

Arthritis Care would like to thank Gui Tran for his help in producing this factsheet.

Contact us

Our Helpline:
0808 800 4050

Our website:
arthritiscare.org.uk

Social media:



@arthritis_care



facebook.com/arthritiscareuk



@arthritiscareuk

Arthritis Care, Floor 4, Linen Court, London N1 6AD Registered Charity Nos. 207711 and SC041156.

Last reviewed in May 2017. Next Review in February 2020. ISBN: 978-0-9955836-4-1.

Please check our website for up-to-date information and reference sources or call 020 7380 6577.



Arthritis Care is a certified member of The Information Standard. This means that you can be confident that Arthritis Care is a reliable and trustworthy source of health and social care information.