

# Polymyalgia rheumatica



## ARTHRITIS INFORMATION SHEET

This sheet has been written for people affected by polymyalgia rheumatica. It provides general information to help you understand how you may be affected and what you can do to manage it. It also tells you where to find further information and advice.

### What is polymyalgia rheumatica?

Polymyalgia rheumatica means 'pain in many muscles'. It is a condition that causes inflammation in the muscles and tissues around the joints. This causes muscles to feel painful and stiff, especially in the shoulder and hip areas, and sometimes in other places including the neck, back, buttocks, and knees. Polymyalgia rheumatica is different to fibromyalgia, a condition that does not cause inflammation.

### What are the symptoms?

The main symptoms are:

- muscle pain and stiffness in the shoulders and hips, and also in the neck, buttocks and thighs on both sides of the body
- pain and stiffness worse in the morning, and after not moving, such as after a long car ride or sitting too long in one position
- pain and stiffness worse in the morning, either when first waking up, or in the early hours of the morning
- difficulty sleeping and doing daily activities (for example, lifting the arms to put on a jacket, bending over to pull on shoes or getting up from a low chair) due to pain and stiffness.

Symptoms usually come on quickly, over several days or weeks and sometimes even overnight.

### What causes it?

The exact cause of polymyalgia rheumatica is not known. In people with polymyalgia rheumatica, inflammation might be found in blood tests but there is no obvious cause. Genetics and/or environmental factors, such as an infection, may play roles in causing this type of arthritis. This has yet to be proven in research.

### How is it diagnosed?


In most cases, polymyalgia rheumatica can be diagnosed by your doctor. They will look at your symptoms, a physical examination and blood tests that measure levels of inflammation. These tests measure the erythrocyte sedimentation rate (ESR) or C-reactive protein (CRP) blood level. However some people with polymyalgia rheumatica can have normal blood tests.

Sometimes it can be hard to diagnose polymyalgia rheumatica. It may take several visits before your doctor can tell if you have polymyalgia rheumatica as the symptoms can be like other types of arthritis. Some types of scans, including nuclear medicine imaging, can be helpful in diagnosing polymyalgia rheumatica.

### What will happen to me?

The good news is that the symptoms of polymyalgia rheumatica usually improve with treatment. In fact, most people find their symptoms improve dramatically within a few days of starting treatment, but some might take a little longer. In some people polymyalgia rheumatica will settle completely over time, over several months to three years, although most people will need to continue treatment during this time to keep the symptoms under control, and this can cause other side-effects. In some other people, however, it does not go away and may need ongoing treatment. If polymyalgia rheumatica does settle completely, it can still return, particularly when you stop treatment, however this is rare if you have been free of symptoms for some time.

For your local Arthritis Office:

 1800 011 041

 [arthritisaustralia.com.au](http://arthritisaustralia.com.au)

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Association

## What treatments are there for polymyalgia rheumatica?

Treatment for polymyalgia rheumatica usually involves medicines called corticosteroids. Your doctor will usually start you on a dose that relieves your symptoms, and then slowly reduce the dose to the lowest possible amount that keeps you symptom free. Corticosteroids can cause side effects so it is important to be reviewed regularly by your doctor while taking these medicines. Some medicines used for other types of inflammation may help some people with polymyalgia rheumatica, although studies are still going on. For information about corticosteroids see the Australian Rheumatology Association's Patient Medicine Information or the *Medicines and arthritis* information sheet.

## What can I do?

**See a doctor and start treatment.** Your doctor will make sure you get the right treatment to manage your symptoms. Your doctor may refer you to a rheumatologist, a doctor who specialises in arthritis, if your condition is difficult to control.

**Learn about polymyalgia rheumatica and play an active role in your treatment.** Not all information you read or hear about is trustworthy so always talk to your doctor or healthcare team about treatments you are thinking about trying. Reliable sources of further information are also listed in the section below. Self management courses aim to help you develop skills to be actively involved in your healthcare. Contact your local Arthritis Office for details of these courses.

Learn about polymyalgia rheumatica and your treatment options. There are effective treatments for polymyalgia rheumatica.



### FOR MORE INFORMATION

#### Websites:

For exercise tips and resources visit [www.movingwitharthritis.org.au](http://www.movingwitharthritis.org.au) to help you self manage your arthritis through improved mobility

Australian Rheumatology Association - information about medicines and seeing a rheumatologist [www.rheumatology.org.au](http://www.rheumatology.org.au)

**Learn ways to manage pain.** See the *Dealing with pain* information sheet.

**Live a healthy life.** Stay physically active, eat a healthy diet, stop smoking and reduce stress to help your overall health and wellbeing. See the *Physical activity* and *Healthy eating* information sheets.

**Acknowledge your feelings and seek support.** Having polymyalgia rheumatica can turn your everyday life upside down. As such it is natural to feel scared, frustrated, sad and sometimes angry. Be aware of these feelings and get help if they start affecting your daily life. See the *t* information sheet.

## Giant cell arteritis

*About one in five people with polymyalgia rheumatica may also develop a serious condition called giant cell arteritis or temporal arteritis. In this condition, the blood vessels, usually on the side of the head, become inflamed. It is diagnosed by looking at a small piece of blood vessel from your forehead (a biopsy) under a microscope. If it is not treated giant cell arteritis can cause permanent damage, such as blindness. If you have headaches, blurred or double vision, pain in the jaw muscles when chewing or the side of your head is sore to touch or swollen, you should see your doctor straight away.*

**CONTACT YOUR LOCAL ARTHRITIS OFFICE FOR MORE INFORMATION SHEETS ON ARTHRITIS.**

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Your local Arthritis Office has information, education and support for people with arthritis

**Infoline 1800 011 041 or [arthritisaustralia.com.au](http://arthritisaustralia.com.au)**