helpful for feeling more in control and helping to retrain your brain. When family and friends also understand this, their support can make recovery easier.

- **Desensitisation:** Gradually exposing the limb to gentle touch, temperature & textures can help reduce sensitivity over time.
- **Graded Motor Imagery (GMI):** This is a sequence of cognitive and physical exercises (including left/right discrimination, imagined movements, and mirror therapy) designed to gradually 'retrain' the brain's understanding of the affected limb without triggering pain.

### Physical therapy

Gentle, graded movement helps restore mobility, reduce stiffness, and retrain the nervous system.

## Recovery

Recovery from CRPS varies. About 70% of people's symptoms improve and 5% recover fully within a year. Early diagnosis and multidisciplinary treatments improve outcomes.

## Living with CRPS

CRPS can significantly affect daily activities. Things that may help include:

- **Building Your Support System:** Having a team who listens, validates your concerns, and supports your recovery helps your brain relax, knowing everything that needs to be done is being done.
- **Pacing Yourself:** Balance activity with rest to avoid symptom flare-ups.
- **Choosing Your Focus:** Directing attention to activities, people, or goals you value can reduce the brain's focus on pain.
- **Staying Active:** Gentle, consistent movement, as you're able, guided by your physiotherapist or OT is crucial for maintaining function and reducing pain sensitivity.
- **Advocating for Yourself:** Don't hesitate to ask questions and discuss your needs with your healthcare team.

## More Information & Support

Ask your healthcare provider for information about reputable additional resources on CRPS and local support groups, if needed.

Written by Dr Helen Stallman, Clinical Psychologist and researcher, with personal experience of CRPS.

# Understanding Complex Regional Pain Syndrome (CRPS)

## A Guide for People with CRPS and Their Families

## What is Complex Regional Pain  Syndrome (CRPS)?

Complex Regional Pain Syndrome, often referred to as CRPS, is a rare neurological condition that arises typically after a limb injury or surgery.

## What Causes CRPS?

Normally, pain signals alert us to injury and fade once healed. With CRPS, this pain signalling system in the brain and nerves goes awry; the brain continues to send pain signals even after the injury has healed, and other symptoms appear. The exact cause of CRPS is not fully understood.

## Signs and Symptoms

You might notice one or more of the following changes in the affected limb:

- **Ongoing Pain:** New pain or pain disproportionate to the injury, often burning or throbbing.
- **Sensory Changes:** Increased sensitivity to touch (even light touch can be painful); increased sensitivity to hot or cold temperatures.
- **Swelling or Skin Colour/Temperature Changes:** Swelling in the affected limb; skin changes like becoming red, blotchy, blue, or very pale; changes in skin temperature (feeling much warmer or colder than the unaffected limb).
- **Movement Issues or Sweating Changes:** Difficulty moving, stiffness, tremors, muscle spasms, changes in sweating, nail, or hair growth.

## Diagnosis

CRPS is usually identified when symptoms are present in three of four categories, with observable changes in at least two. Other possible causes are ruled out before CRPS is confirmed. Sometimes diagnosis is delayed—**don't despair.**

## Treatment for CRPS

Effective CRPS treatment often involves multiple health professionals.

- **Early Consultation:** Talk to your GP (general practitioner) or physiotherapist as soon as you have concerns.
- **Specialist Pain Clinics:** If available in your area, ask your GP for a referral to a persistent pain clinic. These clinics offer a multidisciplinary team approach, including doctors, physiotherapists, psychologists, and occupational therapists, working together to support your recovery.

## Key Treatments

### Reducing Pain Signals

- **Hypnosis:** For some, hypnosis can be an effective technique to alter pain perception and help the brain reduce its pain signals.
- **Distraction:** Engaging deeply in activities that shift your focus away from the pain can be very helpful. This could include hobbies, social interactions, exercise, or concentrating fully on any task you are doing.
- **Pain Medications:** Some medications may help reduce nerve pain and inflammation.

### Retraining the Nervous System

This approach aims to teach your brain and nervous system to process sensations more accurately, reducing the 'overdrive' state.

- **Understanding Pain:** A crucial step is learning that the brain and nervous system can keep generating pain signals even after an injury has healed. Resources like Butler & Moseley's *Explain Pain* book can be very