

Ross River virus and Barmah Forest virus

This sheet has been written for people affected by Ross River virus or Barmah Forest virus. 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 Ross River virus and Barmah Forest virus?

Ross River virus and Barmah Forest virus are infections that are spread to humans through mosquito bites.

They cause similar illnesses, including joint inflammation and pain. People of all ages are at risk of developing these infections. Ross River virus is the most common and widespread of mosquito borne diseases that infect humans in Australia. It is also known as epidemic polyarthritis.

What are the symptoms?

The majority of people infected with these viruses have slight or no symptoms. About three out of ten people will develop symptoms which usually appear within three to 21 days after infection and can include:

- a rash on the trunk and limbs. The rash usually consists of small red spots and lasts around seven to ten days. It can occur up to two weeks before or after other symptoms. It may appear similar to rashes associated with other infectious diseases.
- general illness with fever, chills, headaches and tiredness.
- joint pain, stiffness and swelling. It commonly affects the fingers, wrists, ankles and knees, but any joint can be affected. Pain can also be felt in tissues surrounding joints, such as muscles, ligaments and tendons.

What causes it?

You can be infected if you are bitten by a mosquito carrying the virus. It is suspected that mosquitoes pick up the viruses from native animals, most likely kangaroos and wallabies. The viruses occur throughout most regions of Australia. Human infections tend to occur more often

in regions with a warm, humid climate that are close to bodies of water where mosquitoes breed. Outbreaks also occur when local conditions of rainfall, tides and temperature result in increased mosquito populations.

How is it diagnosed?

Anyone who develops symptoms of these viruses should see a doctor so that the exact condition can be diagnosed. Your doctor can diagnose Ross River virus or Barmah Forest virus infection from your symptoms and physical examination. A blood test can confirm that there has been recent infection by the virus although it may need to be repeated to be certain. Your doctor may also order blood tests to help rule out other types of arthritis as the symptoms may be similar.

What will happen to me?

Most people recover completely from these viruses, although recovery can take a few weeks to a few months. During this time you may find that your symptoms are worse some days and better other days. You may also need some form of treatment, usually medicines, while symptoms are present to help control joint pain and swelling. For some people, symptoms persist or come and go for a year or more, although this is rare. The viruses do not cause any permanent damage to the joints and your joints will recover fully over time. Once you have had the virus, you are protected from the disease for the rest of your life.

Is there a cure?

There is no known cure for these viral infections. However there are many treatments available to relieve the symptoms and most people will recover with time. Protection against mosquito bites is the best form of protection against infection.

What treatments are there?

Your doctor will tailor your treatment to your symptoms and how severe your condition is. There is no way of predicting exactly which treatment will work best for you. Your doctor may need to trial several different treatments before finding the one that is right for you. Medicines used to treat Ross River virus and Barmah Forest virus include:

- simple pain relief, using medicines such as paracetamol
- non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs).

For more information about these types of medicines see the Australian Rheumatology Association's Patient Medicine Information or the *Medicines and arthritis* information sheet.

What can I do?

1. See your doctor for treatment and advice. Your doctor can help you find the best treatment to manage your symptoms. Your doctor may refer you to a rheumatologist (an arthritis specialist) if your condition is difficult to control. If you have joint pain that continues for several months or starts worsening, ask your doctor to consider referring you to a rheumatologist. See the *Working with your healthcare team* information sheet.

2. Learn about the condition 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.

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

4. 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.

5. Acknowledge your feelings and seek support. Your everyday life can be turned upside down by arthritis and it is natural to feel scared, sad, frustrated and angry. Be aware of these feelings and get help if they start affecting your daily life. See the *Arthritis and emotions* information sheet.

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

Ross River virus and Barmah Forest virus can be well controlled with treatment and resolved over time. Learn about your treatment options.

For more information:

Australian Rheumatology Association - information about medicines and seeing a rheumatologist
www.rheumatology.org.au

The Arthritis Research Campaign (UK) www.arc.org.uk

American College of Rheumatology www.rheumatology.org
Arthritis Foundation (US) www.arthritis.org