

Ross River virus disease

Ross River virus disease can cause joint inflammation and pain, fatigue and muscle aches. Many infected people also develop a rash of variable appearance. Everyone recovers, although some people have intermittent symptoms for a year or more.

Ross River virus disease is caused by an alphavirus, which is spread by mosquitoes. Approximately 30 per cent of people infected with the virus will develop symptoms three to 11 days after being infected with others developing symptoms up to 21 days after the exposure.

When in mosquito-prone areas, wear loose-fitting, light-coloured clothing and use insect repellent to help reduce the chance of being bitten by mosquitoes.

Ross River virus disease causes arthritis or joint pain

Arthritis caused by Ross River virus disease lasts from days to months. The joints commonly affected include:

- Wrists
- Knees
- Ankles
- Small joints of the extremities, such as fingers or toes.

Some people may have transient symptoms that come and go (but become less severe) for a year or more.

A number of other symptoms

Ross River virus disease can also cause:

- A rash of variable appearance on the trunk and limbs. This affects many people with this virus. It usually occurs one to 10 days after the onset of arthritis and can last up to seven to 10 days.
- Enlargement of lymph nodes, especially in the groin or the armpit.
- A feeling of 'pins and needles' and tenderness on the soles of one's feet and palms of one's hands (in a small number of infected people).

Fever is usually not a prominent feature.

Mosquitoes spread the disease

People can be infected with Ross River virus when they are bitten by a mosquito carrying the virus. It is suspected that mosquitoes pick up the virus from kangaroos and possibly other marsupials and wild rodents, which can act as a natural host for the virus. Diseases that are spread by insects are known as 'vector-borne' diseases.

Common all over Australia

Ross River virus disease occurs throughout most regions of Australia, particularly around inland waterways and coastal regions. Epidemics occur from time to time and are related to environmental conditions that encourage mosquito breeding such as heavy rainfall, floods, high tides and temperature.

The overuse of water, particularly in rural areas, also contributes to mosquito breeding.

Blood tests will show if you have Ross River virus

Blood tests can reveal if a person has been infected with Ross River virus recently or in the past. If there has been an outbreak in your local area, the disease may be diagnosed by doctors solely on symptoms; however, blood tests are recommended to confirm the diagnosis.

Most people recover from RRV

The majority of people with Ross River virus disease recover completely within a year. Current knowledge suggests that the body builds an immune response to the virus, which is likely to protect you against the disease for the rest of your life. Some people may have symptoms that last longer than a year or recur but these may be due to other causes. See your doctor to check your diagnosis if you are concerned about ongoing symptoms.

Preventing Ross River virus disease

To reduce the risk of infection:

- Wear long, light-coloured, loose-fitting clothing and use effective insect repellents, which need to be applied regularly according to the manufacturer's instructions.
- Avoid mosquito-prone areas, especially at dusk and dawn when mosquitoes are more active and likely to bite.
- Ensure that your accommodation has flyscreens properly fitted to windows and external doors.
- Reduce the number of potential mosquito breeding habitats around your home by ensuring no stagnant water is present. Containers holding water should be emptied and washed regularly.

Where to get help

- Your local doctor
- Your local council
- Public Health, Department of Health Victoria Tel. (03) 9096 0000

Things to remember

- Ross River virus disease is spread by mosquitoes.
- Joint inflammation and pain, fatigue and muscle aches are the usual symptoms of Ross River virus disease. Many infected people also develop a rash.
- Reduce the chance of being bitten by mosquitoes by wearing long, loose-fitting clothes and use effective insect repellents in mosquito-prone areas.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Department of Health - Communicable Disease Prevention and Control Unit

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