

II.

## *Managing Your Psoriatic Arthritis Care*



# Diagnosing Psoriatic Arthritis

The symptoms of [psoriatic arthritis \(PsA\)](#), particularly in women, can be similar to other rheumatic diseases, such fibromyalgia and rheumatoid arthritis – both of which involve chronic joint pain and stiffness. There is no specific diagnostic test for PsA, so diagnosis often relies on a combination of findings from physical examinations, laboratory tests, and imaging.

**13% of those who screened positive for PsA using the PEST had not previously been diagnosed with PsA.<sup>9</sup>**

There are screening tools, such as the [Psoriasis Epidemiology Screening Tool \(PEST\)](#) that can help assess if PsA is a likely cause of symptoms in patients with existing psoriasis.<sup>9</sup> It is recommended that individuals with psoriasis complete the PEST annually, and it may also be helpful to use this tool before visiting your health care provider. See the [Doctor's Visit Worksheet](#) in the SWHR Psoriatic Arthritis Toolkit for more information.

Your primary care provider might refer you to a [rheumatologist](#) or dermatologist to better assess your symptoms for psoriasis or PsA.

Your health care provider will likely consider a number of factors during your journey to diagnosis:

- Medical and family history
- Relevant risk factors
- Past and current symptoms
- A physical exam of your joints, fingers, toes, and feet
- Imaging tests (e.g., x-ray, ultrasound, or MRI) to determine possible joint or tissue damage
- Laboratory tests (e.g., blood tests) for biomarkers of inflammation or a different condition, such as another form of arthritis

Since PsA symptoms may start out mild and develop well after psoriasis onset, the disease can be difficult to catch early. It is important for individuals who are high-risk for developing PsA, especially those who already have psoriasis, to monitor for PsA symptoms.

## Did you know?

Women's spinal x-rays are less likely than men's to show damage from PsA; however, this does not mean that PsA is not present or causing symptoms.

**Even a 6-month delay in PsA diagnosis can have long-term physical impacts.<sup>10</sup>**

Knowing if you have psoriasis is an important indicator of risk for PsA. For women of color, a PsA diagnosis may be further delayed if psoriasis symptoms are not accurately recognized. Psoriasis plaques and scales appear differently on different skin types. For example, skin plaques are more likely to appear violet in African American women and salmon colored in Hispanic women, rather than red, which is typically the color of skin plaques in white women. If you have concerns about any skin symptoms, talk to your health care provider, and do not be afraid to get a second opinion if you feel your concerns are not well-addressed.

# Treatment Options for Psoriatic Arthritis

There is no cure for PsA, but there are several medical and lifestyle approaches that can prevent progression of PsA, improve symptoms, and in many cases, achieve symptom [remission](#). Treatment approaches vary depending on the type and severity of disease and whether you have PsA with or without psoriasis. Talk to your health care provider(s) about which treatment options would be appropriate for you.

## Medications

- **To reduce inflammation**
  - Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), which can also relieve pain (pill or topical cream)
  - Corticosteroids (pill or joint injection)
- **To slow disease progression and joint damage**
  - Disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs (DMARDs), which can also reduce inflammation (pill or injection)
  - Biologic agents (injection or intravenous infusion)



## Surgery

- **Joint replacement** surgery to improve joint function and reduce pain in cases with severe joint damage

## Complementary and Alternative Medicine Approaches

- **Support Devices** (braces, splints, orthotics) to protect affected joints and prevent further damage
- **Acupuncture** for pain relief
- **Meditation** for stress reduction and pain management
- **Therapy** (physical and/or occupational) for pain relief and increased flexibility and mobility
- **Yoga** for stress management, pain relief, and increased flexibility and mobility



If you experience foot pain, a podiatrist (leg and foot doctor) might suggest inserts, heel cups, or pads that may be used in shoes to relieve pain from heel spurs and arthritis in other areas of the foot.

## Lifestyle Approaches and Self-Care

There are a number of steps you can take at home to help reduce your symptoms and prevent symptom flares.

- Moderate exercise can relieve stiffness or pain
- Healthy and balanced diet may improve symptom and decrease inflammation
- Healthy weight maintenance puts less strain on joints
- Heat and cold therapy can ease swelling and joint pain
- Avoid smoking and reduce alcohol intake to promote reduced severity of symptoms

## Deciding on a Treatment Plan

Things to consider when deciding your treatment plan:

- Your age
- Lifestyle and activity levels
- Symptom management
- Treatment efficacy and side effects
- Other health conditions you may have
- Health insurance coverage

Your treatment plan will likely incorporate a combination of approaches, and it may change over time. You should discuss with your health care providers which treatments will address the disease itself and which will address your symptoms, as well as your personal needs and goals for treatment, both now and in the future.



Some other key topics to discuss include:

- A multi-disciplinary medical team approach to managing your psoriatic disease
- What benefits to expect from your treatment(s), and how long you can expect to wait before experiencing improvements
- Side effects of any medications and/or therapies and how to handle them
- Reproductive health and plans for family building
- Recommended resources to help you understand your financial options for paying for treatments

Studies report that, overall, women respond differently to PsA treatments than men and may need to change therapies during their care journey to achieve remission.<sup>7</sup>

Ask your providers to outline what a follow-up plan for monitoring your health looks like – follow-up tests, recovery time for any procedures, which specialists to consult, and how often to schedule a visit.

## Understanding Chronic Disease Management

Psoriatic arthritis (PsA) is a chronic condition that you will need to manage throughout your life. Successful chronic disease management for PsA requires a strong partnership between you and your team of health care providers. It might be overwhelming to learn there is no cure for your disease, but with the right treatment regimen, lifestyle approaches, and management team, it is possible to reach low enough disease activity that your PsA symptoms are considered to be in remission. Changes will eventually become routine and feel less disruptive over time. Some tips for managing chronic disease are on the next page.

**Keep a record or journal of your treatment activities** and how each affects your symptoms and health, so that it is readily available when you talk with your health care providers. Tracking potential triggers can also help you identify products, activities, or other aspects of your daily life that may be influencing your symptoms.



- For more information, see the [Doctor's Visit Worksheet](#) of the SWHR Psoriatic Arthritis Toolkit.

**Know that symptom flares are common.** While it can be frustrating and disruptive to experience a symptom flare, you can come up with a plan for how to manage flares when they occur. This might include rest, additional self-care activities, or connecting with your health care provider.



**Include others.** Connect with friends, family, peer support groups, patient navigators, or others that can help you as you adjust to life with a chronic condition.



- For more information, see the [Support Organizations and Resources](#) section of the SWHR Psoriatic Arthritis Toolkit.

**Seek support for your mental health and wellness.** It is common for individuals with chronic health conditions to experience anxiety or depression. It is important to recognize this, and to seek professional help if you need it.



- For more information, see the [Emotional Wellness and Seeking Support](#) section of the SWHR Psoriatic Arthritis Toolkit.

## A Team Approach

A good primary care physician and **rheumatologist** are essential to your PsA care. Other health care professionals that they might consult as part of your multidisciplinary care team are:

- **Cardiologist** to monitor increased risk for heart disease
- **Dermatologist** for management of psoriasis and skin symptoms
- **Dietician or nutritionist** for support in developing and maintaining a healthy diet
- **Mental Health Professional** for emotional health, behavioral therapy, and coping skills
- **Ophthalmologist** to monitor and treat eye inflammation
- **Pain Specialist** for severe pain management
- **Podiatrist** for foot and ankle pain
- **Physical or Occupational Therapist** for joint rehabilitation, strengthening, and pain management

A **rheumatologist** is a doctor of internal medicine or pediatrician who specializes in diseases of the joints, muscles, and bones.

# Talking to Your Health Care Provider

Recognizing the risks and symptoms of PsA will help you know when it is necessary to seek care. If you are currently experiencing symptoms and think you may have PsA, **do not wait for them to become severe before seeing your health care provider.**

## Preparing for a Health Care Visit

To help your provider better understand your symptoms and experience, give specific examples and details about your pain, discomfort, or difficulties with daily activities. For example, list activities that your symptoms prohibit you from doing and use descriptive words to convey what kind of pain you feel (e.g., dull, aching, sharp, stabbing). You should also discuss the remedies you have tried to manage your symptoms.

For your appointments, consider bringing the following:

- Your history of symptoms (e.g., when they started, duration, triggers, coping and management strategies)
- A record of relevant tests, treatments, and surgeries you have completed
- Results from your Psoriasis Epidemiology Screening Tool (PEST)
- A list of your current medications and past diagnoses for any medical conditions
- Names and contact information for other health care professionals who provide you with care
- A support person (e.g., spouse, family member, or friend) who can help you take notes and advocate for you



Do not hesitate to seek out a second opinion if you want another perspective on your diagnosis and/or about treatment options.

## Questions to Ask Your Health Care Provider

Compiling a list of questions before visiting your provider may help you feel more prepared to discuss your experience and plans for symptom management. Questions may vary depending on your stage of PsA and the severity of your symptoms. Below are some example questions you may consider asking.

- I am experiencing [*joint pain/stiffness/swelling*]. What can I do to manage or treat my symptoms?
- Can you explain how my current and/or new therapy works? How long should I expect it to take before I feel some symptom relief?
- Are there side effects I should watch for? What should I do if I experience side effects?
- How will PsA affect my long-term health? Is remission possible?
- Does PsA affect fertility or pregnancy? If so, how?
- Are there medications that I won't be able to take during pregnancy and/or breastfeeding?
- Is PsA something that I could genetically pass on to my children?
- How often should I come back for follow-up appointments?
- Do I have an elevated risk for another condition like heart disease or osteoporosis? Is there a screening test or preventive steps we should pursue?
- Can you recommend some resources that can help me talk to my partner, family, friends, or employer about having a chronic health condition?
- What additional resources or support groups do you suggest I explore?

There is a significant genetic component to PsA. **33-50%** of individuals with PsA have at least one immediate family member who also has psoriasis or PsA.<sup>11</sup>

# Navigating Insurance Coverage

PsA requires life-long monitoring and treatment. You may need to work with your health care providers and insurance company to ensure that your care does not result in undue financial burden. Here are some tips on how to effectively communicate with your health insurance provider.

## Talking with Your Insurance Company

### *Know the details of your insurance policies.*

Coverage for chronic diseases can sometimes be confusing, and many individuals will have a variety of providers in both primary and specialty care.

Request a copy of your insurance policies for explanations about:

- Services covered, including policies surrounding pre-existing conditions
- Referral processes to see various health care professionals
- Prior authorization processes to receive services or medications
- Premium payment amounts
- Policy expiration date

### *Understand the financial aspects of your policy.*

Insurance plans rarely cover 100% of health care costs, requiring patients to pay a portion of the costs. The main types of out-of-pocket costs are:

- **Deductible** – a preset amount you must pay annually before your insurance coverage fully kicks in
- **Copayment** – a preset, flat fee you must pay for each doctor's visit, and for prescriptions, tests, etc.; these payments do not count towards your annual deductible
- **Coinsurance** – an amount (often a percentage) you must continue pay for visits and services after the deductible has been reached

### *Be aware of special coverage requirements.*

Some insurance companies have prior authorization requirements that must be met before they will cover a specific medication, treatment, or procedure.

- Some plans may require a specialist to evaluate you before you can receive certain medications.
- Some plans may require medications to be prescribed in a specified order and with certain outcomes (e.g., step therapy).

In most cases, your doctor's office will be responsible for submitting the prior authorization request. You may have to work with the office staff to ensure the necessary forms are completed accurately and submitted quickly.

Talk with your health care providers to determine if the required treatments in a step therapy plan could have negative consequences on your disease progression. If so, work with their office to appeal the step therapy requirement as soon as possible.

For additional help navigating the insurance process, some insurance companies offer the support of a case manager that you may be able to request. When available, this is typically a free resource provided by the insurance company.

## Filing Claims and Appeals

There are a variety of reasons your insurance company might deny your claim for your PsA care, such as:

- The benefit is not offered under your health plan
- The requested service or treatment is deemed “not medically necessary”
- The requested service or treatment is considered “experimental” or “investigative”
- Your medical issue began before you joined the plan
- The health care provider is not in your plan’s approved network
- The requested treatment is not on your plan’s formulary (list of approved drugs)

Your insurance company must notify you to explain why your claim was denied in writing. This has to be completed within a certain timeframe, depending on the circumstance. Typically, these timeframes are:

- **15 days** for prior authorization of a treatment
- **30 days** for medical services already received
- **72 hours** for urgent care cases

If your insurance company denies your claim for your PsA care, **you have the right to appeal the decision.**

Insurers are required to tell you how you can dispute their decisions and how they can be referred to and reviewed by a third party. **If you decide to appeal, it is important to take action immediately.** Carefully review your insurance policy to understand what it covers and to outline your argument as to why your insurer should honor your appeal.

**Step therapy** is a policy implemented by an insurance company that requires a patient to use a lower-cost treatment before a clinician can prescribe a newer or more expensive treatment option. This policy, often referred to as “fail first,” can delay preferred treatments and result in unnecessary disease progression or burden.

Patient navigators, also referred to as patient advocates, are people who help guide patients through the health care system. Patient navigators may be able to offer a wide variety of services, including setting up doctor’s appointments, communicating with insurance companies, and providing social support while individuals navigate complex medical conditions and care.

## Additional Resources

- **Employer** – If you receive health insurance coverage through your employer, contact the human resources department. They may have dedicated case managers who can assist with your appeal or connect you with potential state-run external review processes.
- **State** – Many states offer administrative help with difficult claims. If you need help filing an internal appeal or external review, contact your state's [Consumer Assistance Program](#). States also offer free health benefits counseling services for Medicare beneficiaries and their families or caregivers, such as the [State Health Insurance Assistance Program \(SHIP\)](#).
- **Federal** – Contact the U.S. Department of Labor [Employee Benefits Security Administration](#) for more information about employer-sponsored benefits.