Diagnosing Psoriatic Arthritis

How is psoriatic arthritis diagnosed?

Like psoriasis, psoriatic arthritis is also a chronic disease related to the immune system. Psoriatic arthritis affects the joints and entheses (places where tendons and ligaments connect to bone). It can cause pain, fatigue, stiffness and swelling. Untreated psoriatic arthritis can result in permanent joint damage. It is important to get the correct diagnosis when symptoms appear and start treatment as soon as possible.

There are many ways to diagnose psoriatic arthritis. Your health care provider will diagnose you by examining your skin, nails, joints and other symptoms. You may have X-rays, an MRI, an ultrasound and blood tests as well.

Psoriatic arthritis may sometimes be incorrectly diagnosed as other types of arthritis or other conditions. However, psoriatic arthritis has characteristics and unique symptoms that can help your provider reach the correct diagnosis.

These symptoms include:

- Morning stiffness or stiffness after resting
- Nail changes such as the nail separating from nail bed, becoming pitted, changing color or resembling a fungal infection
- Swelling of whole fingers or toes rather than just knuckles (also called dactylitis or “sausage digits”)
- Asymmetric joint symptoms (not the same on the right and left sides of the body)
- Enthesitis (pain and swelling of the entheses or places where tendons and ligaments connect to bone, pronounced en-thi-SAI-tis) that commonly affects areas such as the bottoms of the feet, heel, hips or spine

A rheumatologist (a doctor who specializes in the diagnosis and treatment of arthritis and other diseases of the joints, muscles and bone) who has experience treating psoriatic arthritis may be best for diagnosing and managing your disease.
There are safe and effective treatment options for psoriasis and psoriatic arthritis (together called psoriatic disease). The National Psoriasis Foundation Medical Board published the first U.S. defined treatment targets for psoriasis in 2016. To read about these targets, please visit www.psoriasis.org/treat-to-target. There are other organizations that have that have developed treatment targets for psoriatic arthritis. We recommend that you speak with your health care provider about treatment targets that are most appropriate for your psoriatic disease. This will help you to know what to expect from your treatments and set personal goals for managing your psoriasis and psoriatic arthritis.

What should you do if you think you have psoriatic arthritis?

Knowing the unique symptoms of psoriatic arthritis can help you to understand your own symptoms. If you experience pain, stiffness or swelling in your joints or entheses, speak with your health care provider about diagnosis and treatment. You may also consider seeing a rheumatologist.

If you think you might have psoriatic arthritis, you can learn more by taking a short five-question quiz at www.psoriasis.org/psa-screening.

You can print your quiz results and share them with your health care provider. Our quiz is based on the Psoriasis Epidemiology Screening Tool. Your health care provider may use other types of tests to diagnose you.

Are you having trouble getting the right diagnosis?

People with psoriatic arthritis are not all alike, and the symptoms can differ from person to person. Understanding the unique symptoms of psoriatic arthritis and how it is different from other types of arthritis can help to rule out other diseases.

- A blood test can be done to rule out rheumatoid arthritis
- Gout normally affects only one joint at a time and does not affect areas that psoriatic arthritis does such as the spine, hips or tips of the fingers
- A symptom of osteoarthritis is pain or stiffness at the end of the day or after activity

Many people who have symptoms of enthesitis may have difficulty getting a diagnosis for psoriatic arthritis. This is because enthesitis does not show up in X-rays. Recent research supports the use of ultrasound technology to diagnose enthesitis in psoriatic arthritis. An ultrasound helps to provide images of changes and inflammation of the tendons, ligaments, joints and places that tendons and ligaments connect to bone.

How to find a health care provider?

It is important for you to learn about psoriatic arthritis and different treatment options. You should use this knowledge to select a provider who helps to meet your goals for treatment. Because psoriasis and psoriatic arthritis can affect you physically and emotionally, it is important for your medical team to work together. This may include a primary care physician, dermatologist, rheumatologist, mental health provider or others.

If you are not already working with a health care provider or you would like a second opinion, we may be able to direct you to a specialist. Contact our Patient Navigation Center (find contact information below).