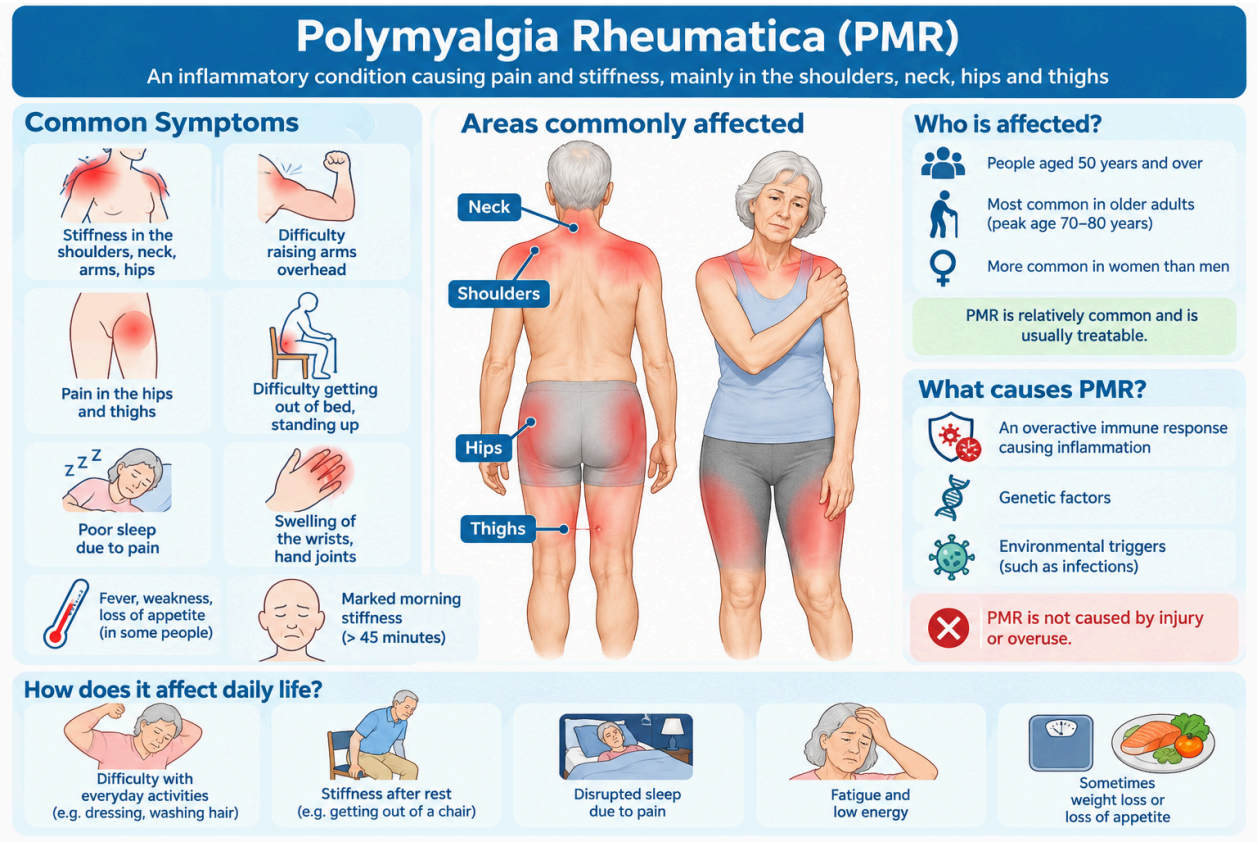
Polymyalgia Rheumatica (PMR)

Understanding symptoms, treatment and self-management

Polymyalgia Rheumatica (PMR)

A guide to symptoms, diagnosis and treatment



What is Polymyalgia Rheumatica?

PMR is an inflammatory condition mainly affecting adults over 50. It causes pain, stiffness and reduced movement, especially around the shoulders, neck, hips and thighs. Symptoms arise from inflammation around joints and surrounding tissues.

Who is affected?

PMR mainly affects people aged 50 and over, most often aged 70–80, and is more common in women than men.

Symptoms, causes and diagnosis

Recognising PMR and understanding clinical assessment

Common symptoms

- Pain and stiffness in the shoulders, upper arms, neck, hips or thighs
- Morning stiffness lasting longer than 45 minutes
- Difficulty lifting arms, dressing or rising from a chair
- Fatigue, poor sleep and sometimes mild fever, weight loss or reduced appetite

Understanding the symptom pattern

Symptoms can develop over days or weeks. Stiffness is often most noticeable on waking or after rest and can make washing, dressing and getting out of a chair difficult.

What causes PMR?

The exact cause is unknown. PMR involves inflammation around joints and surrounding tissues. Immune-related changes, genetic factors and environmental triggers may contribute. It is not caused by injury or overuse.

How clinicians diagnose PMR

There is no single diagnostic test. Your clinician considers the pattern of symptoms, your medical history, inflammation blood tests (ESR and CRP), response to steroid treatment and other conditions that can cause similar symptoms.

Preparing for your appointment

Make a note of where you feel stiff or painful, how long morning stiffness lasts, which activities are affected, and any other symptoms. Bring an up-to-date medication list.

PMR exercise examples

Gentle mobility and strength with physiotherapy guidance

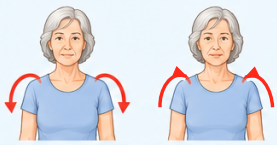
Keeping active with PMR

Once symptoms are controlled, gentle regular movement can support mobility, strength and everyday activities.

Polymyalgia Rheumatica (PMR) – Exercise Examples

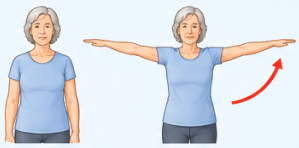
Gentle exercises to maintain mobility, reduce stiffness and support daily function

1 Shoulder rolls



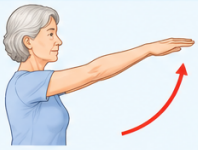
- Sit or stand comfortably
- Gently roll your shoulders forwards in a circular motion, then backwards
- Repeat 5–10 times each way

2 Arm raise to the side



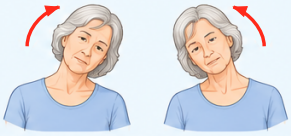
- Stand or sit with good posture
- Slowly raise both arms out to the side to shoulder height
- Hold for a few seconds, then lower
- Repeat 5–10 times

3 Arm raise forwards



- Stand or sit comfortably
- Slowly lift both arms forwards to shoulder height
- Hold for a few seconds, then lower
- Repeat 5–10 times

4 Neck gentle stretch



- Sit or stand comfortably
- Gently tilt your ear towards your shoulder
- Hold for 10–15 seconds
- Repeat 3–5 times each side

5 Sit to stand



- Sit on a sturdy chair with arms crossed
- Stand up slowly, then sit down slowly
- Keep your balance and use a controlled movement movement
- Repeat 5–10 times

6 Hip abduction (standing)



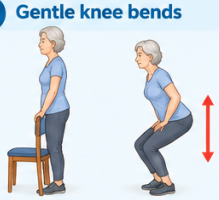
- Stand holding a chair for support
- Keep your body upright
- Gently move one leg out to the side, then return
- Repeat 5–10 times each leg

7 Hip extension (standing)



- Stand holding a chair for support
- Keep your body upright
- Gently move one leg backwards, keeping your knee straight
- Repeat 5–10 times each leg

8 Gentle knee bends



- Stand holding a chair for balance
- Gently bend your knees a little, then straighten
- Keep your back upright
- Repeat 5–10 times

Important information

- Start with gentle, comfortable movements.
- Keep exercises within a pain-free range.
- Breathe normally and move slowly.
- Stop if you have increased pain or feel unwell.
- Build up gradually and aim for regular practice.
- These exercises can help maintain joint mobility, reduce stiffness and support daily activities.
- Ask your physiotherapist which exercises are most suitable for you.

Exercise safely

Start with small, comfortable movements. Move slowly and breathe normally. Stop if pain increases or you feel unwell. Ask your physiotherapist which exercises are appropriate for you.

Building activity gradually

Try short sessions of comfortable movement and build up gradually. Alternate activity with rest as needed, and adapt the exercises to your mobility and energy levels.

Treatment and activity

Managing inflammation and staying active safely

Steroid treatment (prednisolone)

Prednisolone is the main treatment for PMR and often improves symptoms within days.
Your prescriber will reduce the dose gradually, guided by symptoms and blood tests.
Treatment may last 1·2 years or longer. Never stop steroids suddenly.
Discuss any side effects or returning symptoms with your healthcare team.

Monitoring and bone health

Attend regular reviews and blood tests to check inflammation and treatment response.
Your clinician may recommend calcium, vitamin D or medicine to protect your bones.
Ask about monitoring blood pressure, blood sugar and other steroid side effects.

Physiotherapy and daily activity

Gentle exercise can maintain joint mobility, muscle strength and everyday function.
Start with comfortable movement; build activity gradually as symptoms improve.
Balance exercise with rest, and pace tasks that increase fatigue or stiffness.
A physiotherapist can tailor exercises to your needs.

Self-management and recovery

Take medicines as prescribed and keep follow-up appointments.
Try regular short walks, gentle mobility exercises and a balanced diet.
Contact your GP if symptoms worsen or daily activities become difficult.

Safety: Giant Cell Arteritis (GCA)

Seek urgent help for a new severe headache, scalp tenderness or jaw pain.
Sudden vision changes or loss of vision require emergency assessment.

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