

What is Ross River virus?

Ross River virus (RRV) disease, also known as epidemic polyarthritis, is caused by a virus that is endemic in Australia. It sometimes causes a flu-like illness with joint pains.

How is RRV spread?

RRV is spread by a number of different types of female mosquitoes. When they feed on the blood of an infected animal, the mosquito may become infected. RRV then multiplies within the mosquito, and is passed to other animals or people when the mosquito bites again.

How common is RRV?

RRV occurs widely in Australia. RRV disease has also been found in eastern Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and the nearby Pacific Islands. Cases peak in summer and autumn. Epidemic outbreaks also occur at times of increased mosquito breeding during periods of high rainfall or high tides. An infected person develops lifelong immunity.

What are the symptoms of RRV infection?

Between 70–90% of people infected with RRV have slight or no symptoms. Symptoms, when they occur, include fever, headache, and aches and pains in the muscles and joints. The most commonly affected joints are the wrists, knees, ankles, toes, and fingers, which may become swollen and stiff, particularly in the morning. A rash can occur on the body, arms, or legs, usually disappearing after 7–10 days. Tingling and pain in the palms of the hands, and soles of the feet, is sometimes present. At times, a general feeling of being unwell, tired, or weak may affect work performance.

How is RRV diagnosed?

By blood test. Often a second test is taken 2–6 weeks later to confirm the diagnosis.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms most commonly appear 7–9 days after infection. Although the time interval varies widely, most cases appear within 5–21 days.

How long does the illness last?

Many people recover completely within a few weeks. However, symptoms can wax and wane for up to one year. Symptoms tend to become less severe with each recurrence. A full recovery can be expected.

What is the treatment for RRV?

There is no specific treatment for RRV, but medication can help ease the symptoms. Plenty of rest, along with moderate exercise and a healthy diet may assist recovery.

What can be done to prevent infection?

Around the home, get rid of water-holding containers as these provide mosquito breeding sites such as ponds, blocked gutters, old tyres, pot plant saucers, and screen all windows and doors. Take personal precautions such as staying indoors around dusk and dawn, wearing light-coloured clothing that covers the arms and legs, and using an insect repellent that contains at least 20% diethyl toluamide (DEET).