

What to Do for Peripheral Neuropathy

Peripheral neuropathy is when the nerves that control sensations and movement of your arms, legs, hands, and feet become damaged. This condition is also called neuropathy.



What causes neuropathy in people with cancer?

One of the most common causes of neuropathy is chemotherapy. Whether symptoms of neuropathy occur – and how severe they get – depends on the type and dose of chemo, as well as how often it is given. Neuropathy often gets worse as treatment goes on or if doses are increased.

Neuropathy can also be caused by:

- Other cancer treatments, like surgery or radiation
- Tumors pressing on nerves
- Infections that affect the nerves
- Spinal cord injuries
- Diabetes
- Drinking too much alcohol
- Shingles
- Low vitamin B levels
- Some autoimmune disorders
- HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) infection
- Poor circulation (peripheral vascular disease)



What does neuropathy feel like?

Symptoms of neuropathy mostly affect the hands or feet, sometimes spreading farther into arms or legs. It can feel like:

- Tingling (or a “pins and needles” feeling)
- Burning or warm feeling
- Numbness
- Weakness

- Discomfort or pain
- Sweating or chilling from decreased ability to feel hot and cold
- Cramps in your legs and feet



How is neuropathy treated?

Treatment is mostly given to help relieve the pain that can come with neuropathy. Researchers are looking at which medicines work best to relieve this kind of pain. It may take more than one try or one type of treatment to find out what works best for you.

Some medicines and other treatments that may help include:

- Patches or creams with numbing medicine that can be put directly on the painful area (for example, lidocaine patches or capsaicin cream)
- Antidepressant medicines, often in smaller doses than what’s used to treat depression
- Antiseizure medicines, which are used to help other types of nerve pain
- Opioids or narcotics, for when pain is severe
- Other treatments, such as electrical nerve stimulation, physical or occupational therapy, relaxation therapy, or acupuncture

It’s important to work closely with your cancer care team to help manage neuropathy. Your cancer care team may temporarily stop chemotherapy or adjust your dose if symptoms become too bothersome or serious.



What can you do to help manage neuropathy?

So far, there's no sure way to help prevent neuropathy. It is a common problem for some people that may last for weeks, months, or even years after treatment is done.

But you can do things to help manage your symptoms. Start right away to help prevent long-term damage that may not get better.

- Take pain medicines as your cancer care team directs. Most pain medicines work best if they are taken before the pain gets bad.
- Help prevent injuries and avoid things that seem to make your symptoms worse, such as touching hot or cold items with your bare hands and feet, or wearing clothes or shoes that are too snug.
- If you have diabetes, control your blood sugar to help prevent more damage to nerves.
- If you have neuropathy in your hands, be very careful when using knives, scissors, box cutters, and other sharp objects. Use them only when you can give your full attention to your task.
- Protect your hands by wearing gloves when you clean, work outdoors, or do repairs.
- Take care of your feet. Look at them once a day to see if you have any injuries or open sores.

- Always wear shoes that cover your whole foot when walking, even at home. Talk with your cancer care team about shoes or special inserts that can help protect your feet. Be sure that you have ways to support yourself if you have problems with stumbling while walking. Handrails in hallways and bathrooms may help you keep your balance. A walker or cane can give you extra support.
- Use night-lights or flashlights when getting up in the dark.
- Protect yourself from heat injuries. Set hot water heaters between 105° and 120°F to help reduce scalding risk while washing your hands.
- Use oven gloves and hot pads when handling hot dishes, racks, or pans.
- If you take baths, check the water temperature with a thermometer.
- Avoid drinking alcohol. It can make your symptoms worse.



When to talk with your cancer care team

Tell your cancer care team about neuropathy changes you are feeling. Let them know when you notice the changes, what you have trouble with, and what things make your symptoms worse or better.



For more information and support, visit the American Cancer Society website at cancer.org/neuropathy or call us at **1-800-227-2345**. We're here when you need us.