

Managing Neuropathy after Cancer Treatment



UHN

Information for cancer survivors

Read this pamphlet to learn:

- What peripheral neuropathy is
- What causes peripheral neuropathy
- What you can do to manage your symptoms
- Where to find more information

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Author: Dr. David Warr, Dr Doris Howell and the ELLICSR Research staff
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What is peripheral neuropathy?

Peripheral neuropathy (also known as simply ‘neuropathy’) is a change in the way the nerves in your body are working due to some types of cancer treatment.

Nerves are long fibers in the body that send out information from one area of your body to another.

The information sent from your nerves help you:

- feel changes in temperature (notice your hands and feet getting hot or cold)
- feel pressure and pain
- control the movement of your arms and legs

Neuropathy is when a nerve or group of nerves are not sending and receiving information the way they should.

What causes neuropathy and how long will this last?

Certain chemotherapy drugs can cause neuropathy, especially at higher doses or after many doses.

Chemotherapy drugs known to cause damage or cause changes in the way your nerves work include:

| | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Vincristine (Velbe) | Ifosfamide (Ifex) |
| Vinblastine (Oncovin) | Oxaliplatin (Eloxatin) |
| Vinorelbine | Cisplatin (Platinol AQ, Platinol) |
| docetaxel (Taxotere) | Etoposide (Vepesid) |
| paclitaxel (Taxol) | Carboplatin |

Symptoms of neuropathy are:

- Tingling, burning, weakness, or numbness in your hands or feet
- Sudden, sharp, stabbing, or electric shock pain
- Loss of feeling
- Loss of balance or having trouble walking, feeling clumsy
- Trouble picking up objects or buttoning clothes
- Hearing loss
- Jaw pain
- Constipation
- Feeling heat and cold either more or less than you used to

Neuropathy can happen ‘acutely’ which means during or shortly after treatment and last a few days, or it can be ‘chronic’. Chronic means that neuropathy is long lasting and doesn’t go away between treatments.

Most people first notice symptoms in their hands or feet, starting with their fingertips and toes. Sometimes, the tingling and pain move up the fingers to the hands or from the toes to the feet. Symptoms can start when you begin treatment, and can go away a few days after treatment. Sometimes though, symptoms do not go away.

This happens most often if you had many doses of chemotherapy drugs that are known to cause neuropathy.

Neuropathy can also develop months or years after treatment.

If you notice any of the symptoms above let your doctor know. Symptoms can improve over time, but it may take up to a year or more.

What can I do if I have neuropathy?



Protect your hands.

- Wear gloves and warm socks, in cold weather, even if your hands and feet don't feel cold. Check the temperature instead of relying on what your body tells you.
- Be careful when handling knives, scissors, and other sharp objects to protect your hands.
- Wear gloves when you clean, work outdoors, or do any repairs to protect your hands from being cut or hurt.



Protect your feet.

- Wear shoes both indoors and outside to protect your feet since you may not notice if you step on something sharp.
- Wear tennis shoes or other shoes with rubber soles to prevent slipping.
- Test the temperature of the water with an area of your body (like your elbow) that is not affected by neuropathy. Do this before taking a bath or wash dishes.
- Check your feet for cuts every day. Sit down and use a small mirror or ask someone to check for you. You may not feel small pebbles or poorly fitted shoes that can irritate your foot and cause an open sore. Look for any redness or blisters that you may not feel. If you get an open sore and do not care of it, it can become a bigger problem (not heal or become infected).

- Use ice packs to help your hands and feet feel better. Use an ice pack for less than 10 minutes at a time to avoid damaging your nerves. Make sure that you give yourself a 10-minute break before putting the ice pack on your affected area again.

What if I have severe neuropathy?

Severe neuropathy is when you are dizzy, have a hard time with balance or feel clumsy.



Check your home carefully.

- Make sure your house is well lit to prevent from falling. Walk slowly, hold onto handrails, and put no-slip bath mats in your tub or shower. Remove area rugs or cords you could trip over. Steady yourself when you walk by using a cane or other device.
- Keep a night light on in your room and along the path to the bathroom.
- Mark the edge of the step with a bright color to help show you where the step ends.
- Tape down the edges of all throw rugs to avoid tripping.



Let your doctor know about any pain or changes that you notice.

- Your doctor may give you:
 - Medicines that are used to treat pain caused by nerve damage, such as Elavil, Pamelor, Neurotin or Lyrica
 - A referral for physical therapy to help with your balance, strength and safety.
 - A referral for occupational therapy to help improve coordination
 - Braces to help with extreme muscle weakness and instability.
- Give yourself time to rest.

Neuropathy can be painful. Talk to you doctor and let him/her know you are in pain.

How do I prepare for my appointment with my doctor?

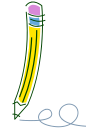
Before you see your family doctor, take some time to think about how your neuropathy is affecting your life.

Ask yourself these 4 questions and write some notes below:

Keep a daily diary for at least a week before your appointment with your doctor.

Write down:

- Any differences you notice in tingling, numbness, balance, pain, sensitivity to heat or cold.
- The number of times your neuropathy interrupted your daily life.
- Any changes or problems with your sleep.



2. How does this neuropathy affect you emotionally (does it make you feel sad, down, anxious)?

3. How does your neuropathy affect you physically (loss of balance, trouble doing your work, daily activities)?

4. How does your neuropathy affect how much you enjoy your life (doing social activities)?

Take this booklet with you when you go to see your doctor. Talk to your doctor about your answers. Let your doctor know how you feel. Only your doctor can help with some causes of neuropathy.

What can I expect after seeing my doctor?

Your doctor will talk to you about different options that may help.

Where can I find more information?

Books and articles

- Perry MC. The Chemotherapy Source Book. 4th edition. 2007. Lippincott Williams and Wilkins.
- Albers J, et al. Interventions for preventing neuropathy caused by cisplatin and related compounds. Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews. 2007. Volume 1.
- Wickham R. Chemotherapy-Induced Peripheral Neuropathy: A Review and Implications for Oncology Nursing Practice. Clinical Journal of Oncology Nursing. 2007. Volume 11(3)361-376.

Websites

Organization: National Cancer Institute

Website: www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/coping/life-after-treatment/page4

Organization: Cancer Encyclopedia

Website: www.cancerview.ca

Peripheral neuropathy fact sheet

Organization: Cancer.Net

Website: www.cancer.net/all-about-cancer/cancernet-feature-articles/side-effects/managing-peripheral-neuropathy

Organization: LIVESTRONG

Website: www.livestrong.com/neuropathy/

Organization: Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center
(see educational videos)

Website: www.mskcc.org/search/site/neuropathy

Remember

- ✓ Protect your hands and feet at all times
- ✓ Make sure that your house is well-lit
- ✓ Use a night light
- ✓ Talk to you doctor about any pain changes
- ✓ Be careful when climbing up and down the stairs
- ✓ Take time to rest