

Peripheral neuropathy during cancer treatment

Some cancer treatments can cause peripheral neuropathy. This is damage to nerves outside the brain or spinal cord. It most commonly affects the hands and feet. If you have symptoms of peripheral neuropathy, tell your doctor, nurse or radiation therapist before your next treatment.

What are the common symptoms?

The symptoms are different for each person. They depend on which nerves are affected and how badly they are damaged.

Nerves in the hands and/or feet are most commonly affected, but nerves in other parts of the body can also be involved.

Possible symptoms may include:

- pain and discomfort
- numbness, tingling, burning or pins and needles
- a feeling of heaviness
- muscle weakness
- a warming or burning sensation when touching something cold
- not being able to tell if something is hot or cold
- difficulty buttoning a shirt or picking things up
- ringing in the ears or difficulty hearing
- bowel problems, including constipation
- feeling light-headed or dizzy
- problems with balance and walking

What causes peripheral neuropathy?

It can be caused by:

- some chemotherapy drugs, e.g., paclitaxel, cisplatin, oxaliplatin, vincristine, thalidomide and bortezomib
- damage to nerves from surgery or radiation therapy
- cancer pressing on a nerve

Individuals with conditions such as diabetes, alcoholism, malnutrition, vitamin B deficiencies, or those who have had cancer treatment before, may be at higher risk of peripheral neuropathy

Important

Make sure you:

- talk to your doctor, nurse or radiation therapist before your next treatment if you have any symptoms that could be peripheral neuropathy
- protect yourself from falls and injuries
- take extra care in the kitchen, bathroom and garden
- ask for help if you need it

Glossary

Peripheral Neuropathy: damage to nerves outside the brain and spinal cord

Paraesthesia: pins and needles, or a prickling,

Tips to prevent falls and injuries

Some symptoms of peripheral neuropathy can increase your chance of falling or hurting yourself.

Prevent falls

- Keep areas well-lit when moving around and free of clutter.
- Get up slowly and take your time to do things.
- Avoid slippery or wet floors and remove or secure floor rugs.
- Place rails on the stairs and in the bathroom.
- Use non-slip bath mats in the shower and bath.
- Wear shoes that fit well.
- Wear non-slip socks.
- Use a walking stick/aid for support if you need to.

Prevent injuries

- Wear gloves and rubber shoes or boots when working in the garage or garden.
- Wear rubber gloves in the kitchen and use potholders and oven mitts to handle hot or cold items.
- Hold mugs by the handle not the cup.
- Be careful when cutting food (shield your fingers) and take care when opening jars or cans.
- Use your elbow to test the water temperature in the shower, bath and when washing up.

Look out for injuries

- Check your hands and feet regularly for any cuts or redness.
- Make sure any cuts or other injuries are assessed and treated to reduce the risk of infection.

Do not be afraid to ask for help

- You may need some assistance with buttoning clothes, using the computer/phone, opening jars or cutting food.
- Speak to your doctor or nurse if these symptoms are new, worsening or worrying you and/or impacting your quality of life.

Other tips

- To lower your risk, avoid drinking too much alcohol or smoking.
- Do not drive if symptoms become severe.
- Try exercise such as walking and stretching to assist with your balance, strength and circulation. Exercise physiologists or physiotherapists can help you with an exercise program.
- If you have diabetes make sure you keep your sugars under control. High sugar levels can also damage your nerves.
- If you need extra help with setting up equipment at home or need someone to help care for your feet speak to your doctor or nurse about seeing an occupational therapist or podiatrist.

Common questions

When does it start?

Peripheral neuropathy is common with some types of chemotherapy and usually starts during treatment.

Peripheral neuropathy caused by radiation therapy can sometimes develop within months to several years after treatment has finished.

How long does it last?

Many people recover from nerve changes over time (usually within a few months). However, it can take some people years after treatment is complete to recover and they may require long-term management.

How is it treated?

Peripheral neuropathy treatment depends on your symptoms and the cause of the nerve damage.

Your doctor will investigate the cause of the damage and manage the symptoms.

If you are having chemotherapy, your treatment may be changed to stop further nerve damage.

If peripheral neuropathy is causing you pain, then speak to your doctor about medications they may be able to prescribe you to help ease the pain.

What to ask your doctor, nurse or radiation therapist

- ✓ Are there any medicines that can help?
- ✓ Should I see a physiotherapist, occupational therapist or exercise physiologist?
- ✓ Should I keep a diary of any new symptoms

For information for patient and carers scan the QR code



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