

Peripheral Neuropathy During Cancer Treatment

What is Peripheral Neuropathy?

Chemotherapy is an important treatment against cancer. Unfortunately, one of the possible side effects can be peripheral neuropathy (new-RAH-puh-thee).

This may occur most often in the fingers, hands, toes, and on the bottom of the feet. You may have one or more of the following:

- Tingling, burning, weakness, cramping, painful numbness, or other unusual feelings.
- Pain or difficulty walking.
- Clumsiness or loss of balance. This may put you at risk of tripping or falling, especially in the shower, at night or in the dark.
- Trouble picking up items, buttoning clothes, or performing other tasks using your fingers.
- Shaking or trembling.
- Jaw pain.
- Hearing problems.

If you have any questions or concerns, please ask your doctor or nurse.

These symptoms may get worse for a few weeks after treatment. This is called “coasting.” Most people will get better in 3 to 6 months, but for some, it could take up to a year. This is because nerves take a long time to heal. For some, the neuropathy may not go away.

The risk of neuropathy may increase with certain conditions, such as:

- Diabetes
- Alcoholism
- Malnutrition or rapid weight loss
- Previous chemotherapy
- Taking certain antibiotics

Care and Treatment

Talk with your healthcare provider if you have neuropathy. There is no one treatment, but some patients have reported that they are helped by:

- Pain medicines
- Applying heat or cold to the affected area.

- Massage
- Acupuncture
- Vitamins (especially B-1, B-6 and B-12. However, there is no recommended dose for the treatment of neuropathy)
- Exercise. In addition to reducing fatigue, it may also help your:
 - Coordination
 - Muscle strength
 - Healing
- Physical therapy and Occupational therapy. This can help with balance, strength and safety.
- Menthol based creams or gels. They may offer temporary relief.
- Relaxation exercises
- Positioning of hands and feet.

Unfortunately, none of these relieve the numbness.

Before starting any treatment, ask your healthcare provider to explain the risks and benefits.

Coping with Neuropathy – Safety Tips

Prevent Injury

- Be very careful when using sharp or dangerous objects.
- Do not walk around barefoot. Wear shoes or slippers at all times when out of bed.
- With certain types of chemotherapy, you should avoid being exposed to cold. If this applies to you:
 - Cover your skin before entering cold places or touching cold objects.
 - Avoid cold drinks and foods.
 - Wear gloves, socks, and hats during cold weather.
- Inspect your skin regularly for cuts or blisters. Even if your feet hurt, you may not sense an ingrown toenail or infection. Consider seeing a podiatrist for regular foot check-ups.
- Use potholders when cooking and gloves when gardening.
- Before bathing, test the water first by a part of your body not affected by neuropathy (such as an elbow), to make sure the water is not too hot.
- Limit or avoid alcohol. This can lead to more nerve damage.

Fall Precautions

- Wear shoes with rubber soles.
- Remove throw rugs.

- If you have problems with strength or balance:
 - Move carefully
 - Use handrails on stairs
 - Place a non-skid bath mat in the tub or shower
 - Use a grab bar in the shower
- Put a night light in the hallway to guide you to the bathroom at night.

Comfort

- Shoe insoles, gel inserts, or arch supports may help walking.
- Plan your activities. Do what is most important first. When needed, ask for help from others.
- Place needed items within arm's reach when in bed.

You can learn more about peripheral neuropathy at:

- The Neuropathy Association www.neuropathy.org
- National Cancer Institute www.cancer.gov
- American Cancer Society www.cancer.org

Northwestern Medicine – Health Information Resources

For more information, contact Northwestern Memorial Hospital's Alberto Culver Health Learning Center (HLC) at hlc@nm.org, or by calling 312.926.5465. You may also visit the HLC on the 3rd floor, Galter Pavilion at 251 E. Huron St., Chicago, IL. Health information professionals can help you find the information you need and provide you with personal support at no charge.

For more information about Northwestern Medicine, please visit our website at nm.org.

Para asistencia en español, por favor llamar al Departamento de Representantes para Pacientes al 312.926.3112.

The entities that come together as Northwestern Medicine are committed to representing the communities we serve, fostering a culture of inclusion, delivering culturally competent care, providing access to treatment and programs in a nondiscriminatory manner and eliminating healthcare disparities. For questions, please call either Northwestern Memorial Hospital's Patient Representatives Department at 312.926.3112, TDD/TTY 312.926.6363, the Northwestern Lake Forest Patient Relations manager at 847.535.8282 and/or the Northwestern Medical Group Patient Representatives Department at 312.695.1100, TDD/TTY 312.926.6363.

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