

Dr. Chalfin's Infosheet on Peripheral Neuropathy

What is Peripheral Neuropathy?

Peripheral neuropathy is a condition that affects the peripheral nerves outside the brain and spinal cord. These nerves help control movement, sensation (like touch and pain), and automatic body functions (like sweating and digestion). When these nerves are damaged, people may feel numbness, tingling, burning, weakness, or pain, usually starting in the feet and hands.

Most Common Causes

Peripheral neuropathy can happen for many reasons. The most common causes include:

- **Diabetes:** High blood sugar can damage nerves over time. Diabetes is the leading cause, responsible for up to half of all cases.
- **Alcohol use:** Drinking too much alcohol can harm nerves.
- **Vitamin deficiencies:** Not getting enough vitamins, especially B12, can lead to nerve problems.
- **Certain medications or toxins:** Some drugs and chemicals can damage nerves.
- **Infections, autoimmune diseases, and inherited conditions:** These are less common but can also cause neuropathy.
- In about 1 out of 4 cases, doctors cannot find a clear cause, which is called "idiopathic" neuropathy.

Prognosis (What to Expect)

Peripheral neuropathy can progress slowly or stay the same for years. In many cases, especially when the cause is unknown or related to diabetes, symptoms may get worse over time, but progression is often slow and sometimes minimal. For some people, especially those with diabetes, controlling blood sugar and other risk factors may help prevent further nerve damage, but it may not reverse existing symptoms. In rare cases, symptoms can improve if the underlying cause is treated early.

Management and Treatment

Treatment depends on the cause. The main goals are to treat the underlying problem (if possible), relieve symptoms, and prevent complications.

- **Treating the Cause:** If neuropathy is due to diabetes, keeping blood sugar in a healthy range is important. If it is due to a vitamin deficiency, replacing the missing vitamin can help. Stopping alcohol or avoiding harmful medications may also help.
- **Managing Symptoms:**
 - **Pain Relief:** Several types of medications can help with nerve pain. These medications do not cure neuropathy or help with numbness, but can help reduce pain. The most commonly recommended are:
 - o **Gabapentinoids** (like gabapentin or pregabalin)
 - o **Antidepressants** (such as amitriptyline, nortriptyline, duloxetine, or venlafaxine)
 - o **Topical treatments** (like lidocaine or capsaicin patches, which are applied to the skin)
 - **Avoiding Opioids:** Strong painkillers (opioids) are not recommended because they can be addictive and have serious side effects.

- **Physical Therapy:** Exercise, strength, and balance training can help improve movement and reduce the risk of falls.

- **Lifestyle Changes:** Eating a healthy diet, staying active, and avoiding alcohol can help prevent further nerve damage.

- **Other Treatments:** Some people may benefit from treatments like transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (TENS), but the benefits are modest.

- **Preventing Complications:** People with neuropathy are at higher risk for foot injuries and infections. Regular foot checks and good foot care are important, especially for those with diabetes.

When to Seek Help

If symptoms are getting worse, if there is sudden weakness, or if there are problems with balance, walking, or bladder/bowel control, it is important to contact a healthcare provider. These could be signs of a more serious problem.

Summary

Peripheral neuropathy is a common condition, especially in people with diabetes. It can cause numbness, tingling, pain, and weakness, usually in the feet and hands. The best way to manage neuropathy is to treat the underlying cause, relieve symptoms, and prevent complications. Medications, physical therapy, and lifestyle changes can help improve quality of life.

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