

Peripheral Neuropathy

What is it? - The peripheral nerves are the nerves outside the brain and spinal cord, the ones that provide connections to the face, arms, legs, and other internal organs. Peripheral Neuropathy is caused by damage to these nerves.

What causes it? - The most common cause is diabetes. There are however many other causes including alcoholism, malnutrition, nutritional deficiencies, some medicines, autoimmune disorders, kidney disease, toxins and genetic factors among others. In many cases the cause is not known.

What are the symptoms? - Changes in the sensation in the toes, feet, legs, hands, and arms are the most common symptoms. There may be weakness; patients may notice tingling, numbness, burning or other abnormal sensations in the affected areas. It can cause pain (dysesthesias).

How is it diagnosed? - A thorough medical history and detailed neurological examination are needed. Your doctor will probably order blood test in the search for treatable causes on the neuropathy. Nerve test (NCV/ EMG) are often needed to confirm the diagnosis and asses the severity. On some cases a nerve and/or muscle biopsy, a spinal tap, or imaging testing (radiological) may be needed.

Is there treatment? - If a specific cause of the neuropathy is found, treatment may be needed. For the most, the treatment for neuropathy is focused on the treatment of the pain/ discomfort. Mild pain may sometimes be alleviated by analgesics sold over the counter. Neuropathic pain is often difficult to control. Several classes of drugs have proved helpful. These include several antiepileptic drugs, antidepressants, and analgesics. Topical medicines can be helpful as well as electrical and laser infrared therapy. For immune mediated neuropathies other medicines including steroids, plasmapheresis or intravenous gamma globulin treatments may be needed.

Lifestyle and home remedies - You need to take good care of your feet. Low carbohydrate diet and good blood sugar control are the most important considerations particularly if you are diabetic. Maintaining physical activity is critical. Stop smoking and avoid alcohol. Massage your feet and use good comfortable shoes. Orthopedic shoes could be needed. Examine your feet regularly.

Will I lose my ability to walk? - Most people can maintain walking ability for many years. Sometimes as the disease progress physical therapy may be recommended. Sometimes an ankle brace for foot drop, a cane or other gait assistance devices may be needed. Prevention of falls is crucial and your doctor can also provide you with information on fall prevention.