

Peripheral Neuropathy

What is it?

Peripheral neuropathy is irritation or damage to the nerve endings in the hands and feet, which may be caused by certain chemotherapy medications or certain diseases such as diabetes. If your neuropathy is caused by chemotherapy, it usually disappears after treatment ends, although it may take several months before it is entirely gone.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms include:

- Numbness and tingling
- Weakness in the *extremities* (hands and feet)
- Pain in the arms, hands, legs, and/or feet
- Abnormal sensations, such as burning, tickling, pricking, or tingling, also known as *paresthesia*
- Balance problems
- Difficulty picking up a small object, such as a coin

How is it diagnosed?

Peripheral neuropathy is diagnosed based on your symptoms.

How is it treated?

Your doctor will first evaluate your symptoms and determine if your neuropathy is chemotherapy related. Mild neuropathy is usually not a major problem; but if it is more serious, your doctor may reduce the dosage of your chemotherapy, stop the therapy, or start you on a different drug.

Neuropathy may disappear completely after treatment ends or persist for long periods or even permanently. If it continues after you stop taking the medication, treatments include:

- Medications such as Neurontin® (gabapentin) to relieve pain.
- *Acupuncture*: This ancient Chinese technique can relieve pain associated with peripheral neuropathy.
- *Massage*: By increasing blood flow, massage may relieve the pain associated with peripheral neuropathy.
- *Physical therapy*: Through range-of-motion and stretching exercises, physical therapy may strengthen weakened muscles resulting from the neuropathy.
- *Transcutaneous nerve stimulation (TENS)*: Through the use of a special device that transmits electrical impulses through electrodes attached to your skin, TENS can provide pain relief and may promote nerve regeneration.



Tips to Help

- Avoid extreme temperatures. Peripheral neuropathy may make areas of your body more sensitive to hot or cold.
- Wear shoes, slippers, gloves, and other protective clothing to protect your skin from damage.
- Use extra care when using hot, sharp, or other potentially harmful objects.
- If you're receiving the chemotherapy drug Eloxatin® (oxaliplatin), avoid cold temperatures or objects for 5 to 7 days after treatment. Wear gloves when you reach inside the refrigerator, drink only room temperature or warm liquids, and don't use ice or eat frozen foods.
- Work with a physical therapist to improve your balance.

Words to Know

Acupuncture: An ancient Chinese treatment in which very thin needles are inserted into certain parts of the body to release chi and relieve pain and other medical conditions.

Extremities: Hands and feet.

Paresthesia: Abnormal sensations, such as burning, tickling, pricking, or tingling.

Peripheral neuropathy: Nerve damage to the hands and feet.

Physical therapy: Range-of-motion and stretching exercises designed to strengthen muscles.

Transcutaneous nerve stimulation (TENS): Therapy that transmits electrical impulses to your nerves and muscles.