

Managing Numbness and Tingling (Peripheral Neuropathy)



Numbness and tingling in your hands and feet is a condition called peripheral neuropathy.

Peripheral neuropathy can be a side effect associated with certain chemotherapy drugs. It is caused by damage to the nerves that transmit signals between the extremities and the central nervous system (CNS).

These nerves include those that transmit sensation from the extremities to the CNS or those that carry signals for muscle movement from the CNS to the extremities.

Depending on the type of nerve damage, an individual with peripheral neuropathy may fully recover without residual effects or may partially recover but have long-term problems in his or her ability to feel or move.

Symptoms of Peripheral Neuropathy

In addition to numbness and tingling, other symptoms of peripheral neuropathy include:

- Weakness
- Pain in the arms, hands, legs, and/or feet
- Abnormal sensations
 - Burning
 - Tickling
 - Prickling

Areas of the body most commonly affected by peripheral neuropathy are the fingers and toes. Symptoms usually start at the end of the extremity and gradually move upward.

Treating Peripheral Neuropathy

The treatment for peripheral neuropathy caused by chemotherapy is to stop the treatment, delay or reduce the dosage, or change to a different drug that does not cause damage to the nerves.

If immediate steps are not taken when symptoms start, peripheral neuropathy can become a long-term problem.

Recovery from peripheral neuropathy is usually slow but steps can be taken to encourage regeneration of the damaged nerves. Approached include:

- **Acupuncture**, which is believed to relieve pain associated with peripheral neuropathy in certain cases. Ask your doctor for more details and the name of a licensed acupuncturist.
- **Massage**, which increases blood flow and may provide pain relief associated with peripheral neuropathy.
- **Physical Therapy**, which uses range-of-motion and stretching exercises that may help strengthen muscles that are weak and improve other symptoms of peripheral neuropathy.
- **Transcutaneous nerve stimulation (TENS)**, which uses a special device that transmits electrical impulses through electrodes attached to your skin. TENS has been shown to provide pain relief and may promote nerve regeneration.

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Safety Concerns for Patients with Peripheral Neuropathy

Because of the absence of sensation and general weakness that result from peripheral neuropathy, you may be more likely to injure yourself. Some of the precautions you can take to avoid injury include:

- Keeping lights on when entering rooms, hallways, and stairways.
- Removing area rugs and clearing clutter in walkways.
- Installing handrails on the sides of stairways and grab bars in the shower or handgrips in the tub, and using skid-free mats in the shower and bathroom.
- Avoiding burns by lowering water temperature in the water heater, using a thermometer to check that water in the bath or shower is below 110°F or below.
- Wiping up spills immediately.
- Using non-breakable dishes; using potholders while cooking and rubber gloves when washing dishes.
- When driving, make sure you can feel the gas and brake pedals and the steering wheel, and that you can quickly move your foot from the gas to the brake.
- Use a cane or walker if you are limping or having difficulty walking.