

Peripheral Neuropathy and Cancer Care

Adapted from: <https://www.evic.org.au/patients-and-carers/patient-information-sheets/managing-side-effects/536-peripheral-neuropathy-during-cancer-treatment>

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms are different for each person. They depend on which nerves are affected and how badly they are damaged.

Nerves in the hands and/or feet are affected most often but nerves in other parts of the body can also be involved.

Possible symptoms include:

- pain and discomfort
- tingling, burning or pins and needles
- a feeling of heaviness
- muscle weakness
- a warming or burning sensation when touching something cold
- not being able to tell if something is hot or cold
- difficulty buttoning a shirt or picking things up
- ringing in the ears or difficulty hearing
- bowel problems, including constipation
- feeling light-headed or dizzy
- problems with balance and walking.

What causes peripheral neuropathy?

It can be caused by:

- some chemotherapy drugs e.g. paclitaxel, cisplatin, oxaliplatin, vincristine, thalidomide and bortezomib
- damage to nerves from surgery or radiotherapy
- the cancer pressing on a nerve.

You may be at higher risk of peripheral neuropathy if you have other conditions such as diabetes, alcoholism, malnutrition, vitamin B deficiencies, or have had cancer treatment before.



Important

Make sure you:

- talk to your doctor, nurse or radiation therapist before your next treatment if you have any symptoms that could be peripheral neuropathy
- protect your hands and feet
- take extra care in the kitchen, bathroom and garden
- ask for help if you need it.

Tips to prevent falls and injuries

Some symptoms of peripheral neuropathy can increase your chance of falling or hurting yourself.

Prevent falls

- Keep areas well lit when moving around.
- Slowly get up and take your time to do things.
- Avoid slippery or wet floors and remove or secure floor rugs.
- Place rails on the stairs and in the bathroom.
- Use non-slip bathmats in the shower and bath.
- Wear shoes that fit well, keep feet uncovered in bed.
- Use a walking stick/aid for support if you need to.

Prevent injuries

- Wear gloves and rubber shoes or boots when working in the garage or garden.
- Wear rubber gloves in the kitchen and use , pot holders and oven mitts to handle items that are hot or cold.
- Be careful when cutting food (shield your fingers) and take care when opening jars or cans.
- Use your elbow to test the water temperature in the shower, bath and when washing up.

Look out for injuries

- Check your hands and feet regularly for any cuts or redness.
- Make sure any cuts or other injuries are assessed and treated to reduce the risk of infection.

Don't be afraid to ask for help

- You may need some assistance with buttoning clothes, using the computer/phone, opening jars or cutting food.
- Speak to your doctor if your symptoms are worrying you or impacting your quality of life.

Other tips

- Avoid smoking or drinking too much alcohol as these can affect feeling in the hands and feet.
- Do not drive if symptoms become severe.

Common questions

When does it start?

Peripheral neuropathy is common with some types of chemotherapy and usually starts during treatment.

Peripheral neuropathy caused by radiotherapy can sometimes happen within months to several years after treatment has finished.

How long does it last?

Many people recover from nerve changes over time, (usually in a few months) although, unfortunately it can take some people years after treatment is complete to recover and require long-term management.

How is it treated?

Peripheral neuropathy treatment depends on your symptoms and the cause of the nerve damage.

Your doctor will investigate the cause of the damage and manage the symptoms.

If you are having chemotherapy, your treatment may be changed to stop further nerve damage.



What to ask your doctor, nurse or radiation therapist

- Are there any medicines that can help?
- Should I see a physiotherapist, occupational therapist or exercise physiologist?
- Should I keep a diary of any new symptoms?
- Who should I contact if I have peripheral neuropathy?

Contact numbers:

Daytime:

Night/weekend:

Key terms

Peripheral Neuropathy: damage to nerves outside the brain and spinal cord

Paraesthesia: pins and needles, or a prickling, burning, tingling or numbing sensation