

Peripheral Neuropathy

What is peripheral neuropathy?

Neuropathy, also called **peripheral** [puh-RIF-er-uh] **neuropathy** [noo-ROP-uh-thee], is a condition that results from damage to nerves, most commonly in the feet and lower legs. Nerve damage can also sometimes occur in the arms and hands or other places in the body.

What are the symptoms?

The most common symptoms are numbness, tingling, stabbing, burning, or pinprick sensations. In some cases, those with peripheral neuropathy may have muscle weakness, notice changes in skin color or temperature, or experience changes in how much they sweat in some areas of the body.

How is it diagnosed?

Your doctor will ask you about your symptoms and perform a physical examination. You will likely have some blood work and other tests. More blood work might be ordered to determine a cause. Your doctor may order a nerve conduction study, called **electromyography** [ih-lek-troh-MAHY-uh-graf-ee] or EMG, or an **MRI** of the brain or spine to help determine the cause or rule out other problems.

What causes it? What are risk factors?

There are many causes of neuropathy. The most common cause is diabetes, and most patients with neuropathy should be tested for this. Other causes include being exposed to toxic chemicals, some types of infections, not getting enough vitamin B12, immune system diseases, and genetic (inherited) conditions.

What are the complications?

Loss of sensation and weakness in the feet and legs can cause balance problems and falls. Numb feet and hands are easy to injure and can become infected, so it is important to protect them and to look for injuries often.

How is it treated?

Your doctor will work with you to treat any cause of peripheral neuropathy such as diabetes. In this case, controlling your blood sugar will help with the symptoms and keep the neuropathy from getting worse.

Painful sensations can be treated with many different medicines, but these usually do not make all pain go away. Medicines will likely improve your quality of life and increase the things you can do, but they will not erase all pain. Habit-forming pain medicines are not recommended for treatment of painful neuropathy unless other options have failed.

Balance problems or muscle weakness that could put you at risk for falls can be treated with physical therapy or by using a cane, walker, or other type of assistive equipment.

When should I call my doctor?

Contact your doctor if you have:

- Symptoms of peripheral neuropathy
- Consistent pain that does not get better with medicines prescribed
- Balance problems or falls
- An injury or infection in your feet

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