

Neuropathy

What is it?

Neuropathy happens when some nerve cells stop functioning properly. Usually, nerves in the hands and feet are affected, but sometimes other nerves may be involved. A person who has neuropathy may have a less sensitive sense of touch in the fingertips. The person may also experience tingling, sometimes described as a “pins and needles” sensation, and/or numbness in the fingers and toes and sometimes the throat or other areas of the body. You may have difficulty picking up a very small object or buttoning a shirt. The nerves in the bowel may also become affected, causing constipation.

When does it happen?

Although some of the signs of neuropathy may appear suddenly, this change in sensation usually builds gradually and can worsen with each additional dose of chemotherapy. It is usually strongest right after a chemo treatment, but tends to lessen just before the next treatment. The symptoms usually peak about 3-5 months after the last dose of treatment is taken. The abnormal sensations may disappear completely or lessen only partially. If neuropathy diminishes, it is a gradual process usually requiring several months. However, in some cases it may be irreversible and never diminish in intensity or the area of the body affected.

Protection and safety for neuropathy:

Persons with neuropathy are more prone to accidents or injuries because of the lack of sensation, weakness, and clumsiness that may come with damage to the nerves of the skin and muscles. It is important to maintain healthy skin when sensory nerves are involved. You may have lessened sensation and not be able to feel the discomfort that would normally alert you that a problem is present.

- Protect areas where sensation is decreased (example; do not walk around without foot wear). Wear thick socks and soft soled shoes.
- Wear warm socks and gloves in cold weather. Protect feet and hands from extreme cold.
- Use care when washing dishes or taking a bath or shower; do not let the water get too hot.
- Use potholders when cooking.
- Use gloves when washing dishes, gardening.
- Inspect skin for cuts, abrasions, burns daily, especially arms, legs, toes and fingers.
- Keep toenails trimmed

Dietary and lifestyle management to relieve neuropathy induced constipation:

- Exercise daily such as a half-hour walk. (Try walking after meals.)
- Eat small frequent meals and chew foods well.
- Drink plenty of fluids, 8-10 glasses of decaffeinated fluids a day.
- Drink several cups of a warm-to-hot decaffeinated drink about one half-hour before the usual time for a bowel movement.
- Eat dried or cooked prunes or drink prune juice 1-2 times a day
- Increase your fiber intake, but only when you are able to drink plenty of fluids or increased fiber may increase constipation. Examples of high fiber foods are whole grain breads and cereals, fruits and vegetables, pinto beans, kidney beans, and peas.
- If you have been prescribed a "bowel regimen," make sure you follow it exactly.