Protecting Yourself from Peripheral Neuropathy

What is peripheral neuropathy?

Peripheral neuropathy is a form of nerve damage which has no cure and has many causes. Diabetes is the most common cause, and it is primarily a result of high blood glucose ("sugar") levels damaging the nerves. Over 50% of those living with diabetes will develop diabetic peripheral neuropathy. People who are pre-diabetic, overweight, on chemotherapy, abuse alcohol or have high blood pressure, elevated cholesterol, hypothyroid disorders, autoimmune disorders, or B12 deficiency can also be at increased risk. The earlier peripheral neuropathy is detected, the sooner your provider can put interventions in place to reduce progression and complications that can significantly impact quality of life.

What are some common symptoms of peripheral neuropathy?

The symptoms of peripheral neuropathy are usually felt first in the feet, though some people may experience them in the hands if the disease is advanced. You may experience some of the following symptoms with your peripheral neuropathy:

- Pain or burning
- Numbness or tingling
- Sensation of pins and needles
- Increased sensitivity to normal touch
- Trouble feeling hot or cold
- Trouble feeling your feet when you walk
- Balance issues

Peripheral Neuropathy: Affects ~30% of individuals > 65 years of age and ~50% of people living with diabetes

What health risks are associated with peripheral neuropathy?

There are several health risks associated with peripheral neuropathy including:

Pain:

You may experience pain which can be severe. It is often described as burning or stabbing pain.

Falls:

People with peripheral neuropathy, especially the elderly, are at a higher risk of falling that may result in serious injuries.

Foot Ulcers:

If you have diabetes and peripheral neuropathy, you are at increased risk of foot ulcers. Ulcers occur most often on the ball of the foot or on the bottom of the big toe. Remember, even though some ulcers do not hurt, every ulcer should be seen by your doctor right away.

Poor Sleep:

The pain associated with peripheral neuropathy may disrupt your normal sleep patterns. The lack of sleep can then increase your sensitivity to pain and generally harm your health.

Can peripheral neuropathy be cured?

There is no “cure” for peripheral neuropathy. However, there are several things that can be done that will slow down its progression and even partially reverse it. Depending on the reason for your peripheral neuropathy, your doctor will give you a plan of action that you should follow as closely as possible. Just by reading this you are taking the important step of educating yourself about peripheral neuropathy.

The American Diabetes Association and Diabetes Canada Recommend Annual Peripheral Neuropathy Testing for People Living With Diabetes.

You can manage the risks associated with peripheral neuropathy. The most important step you can take is to talk to your doctor about your symptoms.

Manage Pain

- If you are experiencing pain, discuss your pain management options with your doctor.

Make Sure You Sleep Well

- If pain is interfering with your sleep, discuss this with your doctor.

Lower Your Risk for Falls

- Remove all items that may be a tripping hazard around your home.
- Keep items you use often in cabinets you can reach easily without using a step stool.
- Use non-slip mats in the bathtub and on shower floors.
- Improve the lighting in your home and always use nightlights.

If You Have Diabetes, Practice Good Foot Care

- Check your feet for sores and other injuries every day.
- Have your feet examined each time you see your doctor.
- Wear shoes that fit right and do not rub or pinch your feet, or cause blisters.
- Never walk barefoot or while wearing just socks.
- Make sure you see a podiatrist on a regular basis.

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