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Home Illnesses and conditions Brain, nerves and spinal cord Peripheral neuropathy Peripheral neuropathy develops when nerves in the body’s extremities – such as the hands, feet and arms – are damaged. The symptoms depend on which nerves are affected. In the UK, it’s estimated that almost 1 in 10 people aged 55 or over are affected by some degree of peripheral neuropathy. The peripheral nervous system is the network of nerves that lie outside the central nervous system (the brain and spinal cord). It includes different types of nerves with their own specific functions, including: The main symptoms can include: These symptoms are usually constant, but may come and go. Read more about symptoms of peripheral neuropathy It’s recommended that people at highest risk of peripheral neuropathy, such as people with diabetes, have regular check-ups. Your GP will ask about your symptoms and may arrange some tests to help identify the underlying cause. You may be referred to a hospital to see a neurologist (a specialist in conditions affecting the nervous system). Generally, the sooner peripheral neuropathy is diagnosed, the better the chance of limiting the damage and preventing further complications. Read more about diagnosing peripheral neuropathy In the UK, diabetes (both type 1 and type 2) is the most common cause of peripheral neuropathy. Over time, the high blood sugar levels associated with diabetes can damage the nerves. This type of nerve damage is known as diabetic polyneuropathy. Peripheral neuropathy can also have a wide range of other causes. For example, it can be caused by: People who are known to be at an increased risk of peripheral neuropathy may have regular check-ups so their nerve function can be assessed. Read more about the causes of peripheral neuropathy Treatment for peripheral neuropathy depends on the symptoms and underlying cause. Only some of the underlying causes of neuropathy can be treated. For example, if you have diabetes it may help to gain better control of your blood sugar level, stop smoking, and cut down on alcohol. Nerve pain may be treated with prescribed medications called neuropathic pain agents, as standard painkillers are often ineffective. If you have other symptoms, these may need to be treated individually. For example, treatment for muscle weakness may involve physiotherapy and the use of walking aids. Read more about treating peripheral neuropathy. The outlook for peripheral neuropathy varies, depending on the underlying cause and which nerves have been damaged. Some cases may improve with time if the underlying cause is treated, whereas in some people the damage may be permanent or may get gradually worse with time. If the underlying cause of peripheral neuropathy isn’t treated, you may be at risk of developing potentially serious complications, such as a foot ulcer that becomes infected. This can lead to gangrene (tissue death) if untreated, and in severe cases may mean the affected foot has to be amputated.