



Nerve Problems (Peripheral Neuropathy) and Cancer Treatment

Some cancer treatments cause peripheral neuropathy, a result of damage to the peripheral nerves. These nerves carry information from the brain to other parts of the body. Side effects depend on which peripheral nerves (sensory, motor, or autonomic) are affected.

Damage to sensory nerves (nerves that help you feel pain, heat, cold, and pressure) can cause:

- tingling, numbness, or a pins-and-needles feeling in your feet and hands that may spread to your legs and arms
- inability to feel a hot or cold sensation, such as a hot stove
- inability to feel pain, such as from a cut or sore on your foot

Damage to motor nerves (nerves that help your muscles to move) can cause:

- weak or achy muscles that may cause you to lose your balance, trip easily, or have difficulty buttoning shirts or opening jars
- muscles that twitch and cramp or muscle wasting (if you don't use your muscles regularly)
- swallowing or breathing difficulties (if your chest or throat muscles are affected)

Damage to autonomic nerves (nerves that control functions such as blood pressure, digestion, heart rate, temperature, and urination) can cause:

- digestive changes such as constipation or diarrhea
- dizzy or faint feeling, due to low blood pressure



People with nerve problems caused by cancer treatment need to take care to prevent falls. Sometimes integrative medicine practices, advised by your doctor, can also help you to feel better.

Credit: iStock

- sexual problems; men may be unable to get an erection and women may not reach orgasm
- sweating problems (either too much or too little sweating)
- urination problems, such as leaking urine or difficulty emptying your bladder

If you start to notice any of the problems listed above, talk with your doctor or nurse. Getting these problems diagnosed and treated early is the best way to control them, prevent further damage, and to reduce pain and other complications.

Ways to prevent or manage problems related to nerve changes

You may be advised to take these steps:

- **Prevent falls.** Have someone help you prevent falls around the house. Move rugs out of your path so you will not trip on them. Put rails on the walls and in the bathroom, so you can hold on to them and balance yourself. Put bathmats in the shower or tub. Wear sturdy shoes with soft soles. Get up slowly after sitting or lying down, especially if you feel dizzy.
- **Take extra care in the kitchen and shower.** Use potholders in the kitchen to protect your hands from burns. Be careful when handling knives or sharp objects. Ask someone to check the water temperature, to make sure it's not too hot.
- **Protect your hands and feet.** Wear shoes, both inside and outside. Check your arms, legs, and feet for cuts or scratches every day. When it's cold, wear warm clothes to protect your hands and feet.
- **Ask for help and slow down.** Let people help you with difficult tasks. Slow down and give yourself more time to do things.
- **Ask about pain medicine and integrative medicine practices.** You may be prescribed pain medicine. Sometimes practices such as acupuncture, massage, physical therapy, yoga, and others may also be advised to lower pain. Talk with your health care team to learn what is advised for you.

Talking with your health care team

Prepare for your visit by making a list of questions to ask. Consider adding these questions to your list:

- What symptoms or problems might I have? Which ones should I call you about?
- When will these problems start? How long might they last?
- What medicine, treatments, and integrative medicine practices could help me to feel better?

- What steps can I take to feel better? What precautions should I take to stay safe?
- Could you refer me to a specialist who could give me additional advice?