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## PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

# Managing Peripheral Neuropathy

This information describes how to manage peripheral neuropathy. At this time, there's no known cure for peripheral neuropathy. But this resource offers ways to manage symptoms and tips for staying safe while you have peripheral neuropathy.

To learn more about peripheral neuropathy, including its causes and symptoms, read *About Peripheral Neuropathy* ([www.mskcc.org/pe/about\\_peripheral\\_neuropathy](http://www.mskcc.org/pe/about_peripheral_neuropathy)).

If you have peripheral neuropathy, you may have a hard time feeling small injuries. Make sure to check your skin for cuts, burns, and scrapes often. Remember to check your hands and feet, too.

It's also important to make healthy lifestyle changes. Try to:

- Exercise regularly (have an exercise routine).
- Quit smoking, if you smoke.
- Eat healthy meals. You can read *Eat Your Way to Better Health* ([www.mskcc.org/pe/eat\\_better\\_health](http://www.mskcc.org/pe/eat_better_health)) to learn more.
- Avoid drinking large amounts of alcohol.
- Keep track of your blood glucose levels, if you have diabetes.
- Take good care of your skin and feet, especially if you have diabetes.

Read the following sections for more tips on how to manage peripheral neuropathy.

# Avoid driving

Because peripheral neuropathy can reduce the feeling in your hands and feet, driving is sometimes not safe. Ask your healthcare provider if it's safe for you to drive based on your symptoms. A rehabilitation specialist may need to learn more about you to see if it's safe for you to drive.

# Make your home safe

Peripheral neuropathy can affect your balance, coordination (control of your body movements), and muscle strength. That's why it's important to make your home as safe as possible. Doing this will reduce your risk of slipping or falling and getting hurt.

Look through each room in your home to make sure it's free of hazards. These are things that could harm you or cause injury. You can have a family member or friend help you. Make sure to also look through your garage, yard, cars, and workplace to make sure they're safe.

## Lights

If you have peripheral neuropathy, you will not feel things the way you used to. This means you'll need to depend more on visual cues (getting information from what you can see). Your rooms should be well-lit, so you don't fall. They should be bright enough for you to see all the areas of the room, but not too bright. Rooms that are too bright can cause problems with glare.

- Install light switches or put lamps at every doorway. The light switch or lamp should be easy to see and turn on from the doorway.
- Always turn lights on before you enter a room. The room should be bright enough for you to see all the areas where you walk or do activities.
- Always turn lights on before you enter a stairway. This includes all stairways, both inside and outside of your home.
- Use floor lights that shine light up from the floor toward the ceiling or wall. This will help reduce glare.
- Use night lights in your bedroom and hallways, if you get up to use the

bathroom at night.

- Keep a flashlight with you or within reach to use when you need more light.
- Use a keychain with a light to help you see keyholes.

## Stairs

- Install handrails on both sides of all stairways and hallways.
- Cover stairs with a non-slip surface.
- Paint stairs in a light color to make them easier to see.
- Clear stairways and hallways of objects, such as small area rugs, toys, and clutter.

## Floors

- Floors should have non-glare and non-skid surfaces.
- If you use area rugs, make sure they have non-slip backing.
- Tape or tack down carpet edges securely.
- If your carpets or area rugs have high edges that you could trip over, think about replacing them with a thinner rug.
- Avoid slippery, wet floors. Wipe up spills and liquids right away.

## Bedroom

- Do not use furniture with wheels, such as chairs, tables, nightstands, or over-bed tables.
- Remove small area rugs, stools, clothes, shoes, and clutter from walkways in your bedroom.
- If you use extension cords, use electrical tape to secure them along the edge of the floor.
- Remove furniture with sharp edges or corners.

## Bathroom

- Use bathtub or sink area rugs with non-slip backing.
- Use non-skid strips or mats in bathtubs and showers. They will help keep you from slipping or falling.
- Use portable (moveable) hand grips over the bathtub or install shower grips.
- Use a non-breakable water thermometer to check the bathwater temperature before you get into the bathtub. Make sure the temperature is below 110 °F (43.3 °C).
- Use a liquid soap dispenser, soap on a rope, or a wash mitt to hold your soap.
- Use long brushes for hard-to-reach areas of your body.
- Use adapted nail clippers to cut your nails. These are nail clippers that are easier to use. You can buy them at a medical supply store or online.
- Avoid slippery, wet floors. Wipe up liquids right away.

## Kitchen

- If you have an area rug near the sink, use one with non-slip backing.
- Use rubber gloves to wash dishes.
- Use a non-breakable water thermometer to check the dishwater temperature before you wash dishes. Make sure the temperature is below 110 °F (43.3 °C).
- Use lightweight, non-breakable glasses, utensils, and plates. You can buy special utensils that are easier to hold.
- Shield your fingers when cutting foods. You can use a finger guard.
- Use easy jar openers, grippers, or tab grabbers to open jars or soft drink cans.
- Use heavy-duty potholders and oven mitts to handle items such as hot pots or pans.

## Garage and yard

- Absorb (soak up) oil spills with sand or kitty litter.
- Store rakes, shovels, and other garden tools off the floor.
- Keep nails, screws, and other hardware in containers with covers.
- Keep walkways clear of toys, wet rags, ropes, hoses, buckets, and clutter.
- Always wear rubber shoes or work boots and gloves when you work in the garage or yard.
- Do not use lawn mowers, electric branch trimmers or saws, or snow blowers.

## Getting dressed

### Buy special tools

You may want to buy special tools to help you dress. You can find these items at a medical supply store or online:

- Zipper pulls
- Buttoners
- Molded sock aids
- Elastic shoelaces
- Velcro® straps
- Instep or arch supports for slippers and shoes
- Cuff and collar extenders
- Lightweight dressing sticks to help put on clothes without bending

You can also buy special pens and pencils that are easier to hold.

### Think about your clothing

When choosing what to wear, it may be helpful to:

- Wear shoes and slippers that come up past the middle of the top of your

feet (your instep).

- Wear gloves and warm socks in cold weather.
- Wear jewelry that you can put on without help, such as jewelry without fasteners (clasps).
- Wear sneakers or supportive shoes to protect your feet. They'll also help improve your balance or unsteady gait (uneven way of walking). These shoes have a low heel height, a thin, firm midsole, a slip-resistant sole, and laces or Velcro to close the shoe. Do not wear shoes with an open back.

If wearing clothes is painful or causes discomfort, talk with your occupational therapist. They can suggest different therapies to help ease and reduce your pain.

## Exercise and massage

Make exercise a part of your routine. It's also important to use self-massage techniques that your physical therapist (PT) or occupational therapist (OT) showed you. This will improve your health and help you manage your symptoms.

- Walking is good exercise for your health and helps keep your muscles flexible.
- Low-back stretches and calf stretches also help keep your muscles flexible.
- Foot and hand massages may help lessen stiffness. If you use lotion or cream for a massage, clean it off your hands and feet after the massage. They can be slippery.

If you exercise in a gym, tell the instructor that you have peripheral neuropathy. They'll tell you what equipment is safe to use.

If your PT or OT gave you exercises to do at home, do them the way they showed you.

# Treatment for peripheral neuropathy

There are treatments that can help ease the symptoms of peripheral neuropathy. The amount of time it takes for symptoms to improve is different for everyone.

## Types of treatment

The type of treatment you get depends on how long you have had your symptoms. It can also depend on how bad your symptoms are. Talk with your healthcare provider about what treatments are best for you.

Depending on your symptoms, your healthcare provider may suggest:

### Over-the-counter medicines

An over-the-counter medicine is one you can buy without a prescription. Examples are:

- Acetaminophen (Tylenol®)
- Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), such as ibuprofen (Advil®, Motrin®) and naproxen (Aleve®)
- Lidocaine ointment, cream, or patch

Check with your healthcare provider before taking any over-the-counter medicine.

### Prescription medicines

A prescription medicine is one you can only get with a prescription from your healthcare provider. Common prescription medicines include:

- Gabapentin (Gralise®, Horizant®, Neurontin®)
- Duloxetine hydrochloride (Cymbalta®, Drizalma Sprinkle®)
- Nortriptyline (Aventyl®, Pamelor®)
- Pregabalin (Lyrica®, Lyrica CR®)

## Complementary therapies

Complementary therapies are treatments you can use to complement (go along with) your other treatments. Examples are:

- Relaxation techniques
- Biofeedback
- Yoga
- Meditation
- Guided imagery
- Acupuncture

If you're interested in complementary therapies, ask your healthcare provider for a referral to our Integrative Medicine and Wellness Service. Visit [www.msk.org/integrativemedicine](http://www.msk.org/integrativemedicine) to learn more.

## Ask for help

Your healthcare provider can prescribe medicines to help with your symptoms. They also can refer you to other healthcare providers. These providers can help ease or reduce your pain and help you cope with how you feel.

- A PT can help with exercise programs and assistive devices (such as a cane, wheelchair, or walker).
- An OT can help you find adaptive devices for work or home. Adaptive devices are items that are easier to use, such as those listed in the “Buy special tools” section.
- A podiatrist (foot doctor) can help you care for your feet.
- A mental health professional (such as a social worker, counselor, or psychologist) can help you deal with peripheral neuropathy. They can provide counseling or therapy to help you manage your emotions. In addition, your healthcare provider or a psychiatrist can prescribe medicines called antidepressants. Antidepressants help improve your mood and treat your depression.

- A support group can help you meet other people with peripheral neuropathy. Joining a support group lets you talk about your feelings and listen to others who have the same concerns. You can learn how others cope with their pain and symptoms.

If you have any questions about these services, talk with a member of your care team.

## When to call your healthcare provider

Call your healthcare provider if:

- You have numbness that's getting worse.
- You have tingling (slight stinging or poking) that's getting worse.
- You have loss of function that's getting worse. Loss of function is when a part of your body stops working like it should.
- You have pain that's getting worse.
- You have a feeling of swelling or tightness that's getting worse.
- The medicine you're taking is not helping with your symptoms.

## Resources

The Foundation for Peripheral Neuropathy®

[www.foundationforpn.org](http://www.foundationforpn.org)

This organization can give you general information about peripheral neuropathy. They also have support groups. Call 847-883-9942 or email [info@tffpn.org](mailto:info@tffpn.org) to learn more.

If you have questions or concerns, contact your healthcare provider. A member of your care team will answer Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Outside those hours, you can leave a message or talk with another MSK provider. There is always a doctor or nurse on call. If you're not sure how to reach your healthcare provider, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit [www.mskcc.org/pe](http://www.mskcc.org/pe) to search our virtual library.

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