



Health Concerns

Peripheral Neuropathy

What is peripheral neuropathy?

Neuropathy is a form of damage to the nerves. Peripheral neuropathy means nerve damage to the part of the nervous system outside the brain and the spinal cord (the central nervous system).

What are the symptoms of peripheral neuropathy?

Peripheral neuropathy usually affects the nerves in the feet, hands and sometimes in the legs. The symptoms can include tingling and numbness, feeling like your hands and feet are on pins and needles, weakness and/or severe pain, and a burning sensation in the hands and feet. Usually both sides of the body are affected equally.

What are the causes of peripheral neuropathy?

Nerve damage among people with HIV/AIDS may be caused by:

- HIV infection itself or other related infections, such as CMV
- certain medications used to treat HIV, such as the “d” drugs - ddI (Videx, Videx EC), ddC (Hivid), d4T (stavudine, Zerit, Zerit XR)
- other drugs used to treat HIV-related conditions, including pentamidine (Pentacarinat) and some antibiotics, particularly those used for TB or some treatments for cancer
- other health conditions, such as diabetes
- excessive and long-term alcohol or drug use
- vitamin B6 and B12 deficiency

How can peripheral neuropathy be treated?

If the neuropathy is caused by certain medications, then decreasing the dose or even stopping the medication may solve the problem. Talk with your doctor or nurse right away if you think you may have peripheral neuropathy. Do not reduce your dose of medication before you have a chance to discuss this with your doctor or nurse.

If the neuropathy is caused by HIV infection, your doctor can prescribe treatments to reduce the pain. Common drugs that are used to treat neuropathy include:

- Elavil (amitriptyline)
- Advil (ibuprofen), Naprosyn or Aspirin
- Dilantin (phenytoin) or Tegretol (carbamazepine)
- Neurontin (Gabapentin)
- Prednisone
- Capsaicin cream
- in severe cases, you may need strong pain relievers, including morphine



Some supplements may help recovery from peripheral neuropathy, including:

- regular injections of vitamin B12, sometimes two or three times weekly
- taking a B-complex vitamin capsule every day
- acetyl-L-carnitine
- calcium and magnesium
- evening primrose oil

Helpful Tips

Here are some tips that may help your feet or hands when you have peripheral neuropathy:

- try not to walk long distances
- wear loose-fitting socks and shoes
- avoid standing for long periods of time
- soak your feet or hands in ice water from time to time
- raising the heels of your feet or hands with a small pillow or cushion can help prevent increased pain while sleeping
- some people with HIV/AIDS find acupuncture or acupressure useful
- some people with HIV/AIDS find that cutting out caffeine (found in coffee, chocolate, tea and pop) is helpful

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