

Patient Education Sheet

Managing Chemotherapy-Induced Peripheral Neuropathy

What is peripheral neuropathy?

Neuropathy is irritation or damage to the nerves. Nerves are long, wire-like fibers that transmit information from one part of our body to another. Peripheral nerves are nerves outside of the brain and the spinal cord.

There are two types of peripheral nerves:

- Sensory nerves give us the ability to feel sensations, temperatures, position, and pain.
- Motor nerves help you move and maintain muscle tone.

Peripheral neuropathy caused by chemotherapy most commonly affects the fingers, hands, arms, toes, feet or legs.

Usually it starts in the fingertips or toes and may spread to include the hands or the soles of the feet and ankles.

What are the symptoms of peripheral neuropathy?

The symptoms depend on what type of chemotherapy is given and on the nerves that are affected. Symptoms may start at any time after receiving chemotherapy and may last a few days or longer.

When sensory nerves are affected, symptoms may include:

- Pain
- Burning
- Tingling
- Loss of ability to feel hot or cold
- Numbness when walking

When motor nerves are affected, symptoms may include:

- Trouble using your fingers to pick up or hold things, buttoning clothing, dropping things or problems writing
- Loss of balance, tripping or stumbling
- Muscle weakness
- Constipation or trouble passing urine

Which chemotherapy drugs might cause peripheral neuropathy?

- Carboplatin
- Cisplatin
- Oxaliplatin
- Revlimid (Lenalidomide)
- Taxol (Paclitaxel)
- Taxotere (Docetaxel)
- Thalidomide
- Velcade (Bortezomib)
- Vincristine
- Vinblastine
- Vinorelbine
- VP-16 (Etoposide)

If the name of the drug you are receiving is not listed, please ask your healthcare provider about it.

Is peripheral neuropathy permanent?

Peripheral neuropathy can be short term and reversible or it can become a chronic or long term problem. Factors that may impact this include:

- Your age
- Other medical conditions such as diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis, or hardening of the arteries
- Prescription drugs
- Family history

What happens if I get peripheral neuropathy?

It is important to tell your healthcare provider as soon as you start noticing any symptoms. Peripheral neuropathy may be reversible. Your healthcare provider will watch you carefully and if the symptoms get worse, it may be necessary to change your treatment plan.

Treatment is aimed at relieving pain, helping you function well, and ensuring your safety. There are medications, skin patches and numbing creams which can help control nerve pain.

If symptoms interfere with your ability to walk, your healthcare provider may refer you to physical or occupational therapy, which can build strength and help you to maintain your normal activities.

Other treatments can be tried to ease symptoms of peripheral neuropathy and its effects on your life. These include:

- Acupuncture
- Biofeedback
- Distraction
- Electrical nerve stimulation
- Guided imagery
- Relaxation therapy

Are there safety measures I should incorporate in my daily activities?

Safety is important due to lack of feeling or weakness. Follow these safety hints:

- Avoid very hot or cold temperatures
- If you are on Oxaliplatin, avoid cold food/drinks and use gloves, socks and scarves to protect yourself from cold temperatures
- Wear shoes with good support and low heels
- Check your shoes before putting them on for any objects like pebbles that might hurt your feet

- Check your feet daily for any skin changes, sores, or injuries
- Take care when walking on uneven or slippery surfaces
- Get up slowly, holding on to a secure surface
- Use handrails when using stairs
- Remove loose area rugs and cords or tape them down
- Keep rooms, hallways and stairs well lit using nightlights or motion-sensor lights
- Use non-slip tub or shower mats; add grab bars near toilet and bathtub
- Use gloves when washing dishes, gardening, working in the garage or yard

Additional Resources

These web sites have additional information on managing the side effects of cancer treatment:

- National Cancer Institute
(800-4-CANCER)
www.cancer.gov
- American Cancer Society
(800-ACS-2345)
www.cancer.org
- Livestrong Foundation Cancer Support
(866-673-7205)
www.livestrong.org