

# Nerve problems related to cancer treatment

## Peripheral neuropathy



You're affected by nerve problems, or you're receiving a treatment that can produce them. This fact sheet explains the causes and what can be done to treat them and relieve the symptoms.

### What is peripheral neuropathy?

Peripheral neuropathy is damage to the nerves. It causes symptoms that affect mostly the extremities of the body, such as the hands or feet. The main symptoms are:

- > Numbness, tingling, sensitivity to touch, sensation of burning or electric shocks in the hands or feet
- > Weakness, cramping, or muscle pain in the legs or arms, especially in the feet or hands
- > Loss of sensation, especially in the hands and feet
- > Joint pains
- > Walking and balance problems
- > Falls
- > Difficulty buttoning clothes
- > Difficulty recognizing the shape of small objects by touch when they're in your hand



### What causes it?

Chemotherapy treatments are the main cause.

Some chemotherapy treatments can cause this kind of problem. To find out whether this is the case for the treatment you're receiving, ask your health care team.

These symptoms can also be caused by other things, such as:

- surgery
- radiation therapy
- a tumour or metastasis pressing on a nerve
- diabetes
- too much alcohol
- a lack of vitamin B
- an autoimmune disease
- a blood circulation problem
- an infection of the nerves (HIV, shingles)

## When is neuropathy likely to occur?

It can happen at any time. Sometimes symptoms increase during treatment. In other cases, they appear only afterwards.



### IMPORTANT

The stronger the symptoms become, the more they affect your quality of life and the more likely they are to become permanent. **Tell your health care team as soon as any symptoms appear.** Then they can look at how your overall symptoms are progressing and do whatever they can to help you.

## How long do these symptoms last?

They usually last from several weeks to several months. The form, strength, and severity of the symptoms varies a lot from one patient to another.

## Are there any treatments for it?

Your care team may suggest several solutions:

- > Changing the chemotherapy dosage.
- > Spacing out your treatments.
- > Giving you medication to relieve pain and discomfort.
- > Referring you to a physiotherapist or occupational therapist. They can help you keep your muscles strong and improve your balance.



Other activities or complementary therapies can also help:

- > Regular strengthening or relaxation exercises
- > Yoga, reiki
- > Massages
- > Acupuncture
- > Relaxation
- > Activities that take your mind off things (e.g., hobbies, reading, talking with friends)



- > Meditation
- > Pain relief using an electrical current (electrical neurostimulation)
- > Mental imagery
- > A balanced diet

To learn more about these methods, see the Useful Resources section at the end of this fact sheet.

## What can I do for myself?

Neuropathy can create a loss of sensation, which can lead to accidents or injuries. Here are some tips to protect yourself:

- > Check the condition of your feet and hands every day.
- > Wear shoes that provide good foot and ankle support.
- > Don't walk barefoot.
- > Wear socks and gloves in cold weather.
- > Be careful when using sharp, hot, or dangerous objects.
- > Take your time when doing activities.

- > In the kitchen or bathroom, do your activities sitting on a chair or stool rather than standing.
- > Turn on a light when it's dark so you can see clearly around you when moving.
- > Remove anything from the floor that could cause you to fall.
- > Make sure the water you use (bath, dishes) is not too hot. Test its temperature with your elbow rather than your hand or foot.
- > Put a non-skid mat in the bathtub or shower so you don't slip.



- > Wear gloves when cleaning, doing chores, or gardening.
- > If you have weakness or loss of balance, use a cane or walker to stay stable when walking.



Don't hesitate to ask your health care team for other tips that could be useful in your case.

## Who can I contact for help or to ask questions?

Your care team will know best how to respond to your questions.



## USEFUL RESOURCES

For more on complementary therapies:  
Canadian Cancer Society

> **cancer.ca**

Type "complementary therapies" into the search box

> **1 888 939-3333**

Volunteer support for patients undergoing cancer treatment:

Fondation Virage

Pavilion C, room C14-7065

1000, rue Saint-Denis

Montréal (Qc) H2X 3E4

> **514 890-8000, ext. 28139**

Other health sheets published by the CHUM are available. Ask for those that might fit your situation.



You can also find them on our website

**chumontreal.qc.ca/fiches-sante**



## Questions


*The content of this document in no way replaces the recommendations and diagnoses made, or the treatment suggested by your health professional.*

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