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Peripheral Neuropathy

What Is Peripheral Neuropathy?

Neuropathy is irritation or damage to nerves. Nerves are long, wire-like fibers in our body that transmit information from one area of our body to another. Peripheral neuropathy is a condition in which a nerve or group of nerves have difficulty "communicating" with each other. When just the ends of nerves (the "periphery") are affected, this is called peripheral neuropathy. Damaged sensory nerves do not accurately "sense" heat, cold, pressure, pain and body position. Damaged motor nerves do not accurately tell muscles to contract and move.

What Causes Peripheral Neuropathy and How Long Will It Last?

Certain chemotherapy drugs can damage peripheral nerves, especially with higher doses or after multiple doses. Occasionally during radiation therapy, injuries occur that could put pressure on nerves. Injuries to nerves could also occur during surgery. And, finally, cancerous tumors can put pressure on nerves or release substances that affect nerves. For most people, symptoms due to treatment may improve or resolve within 6-12 months. Some people do experience these symptoms for up to 2 years.

What are the Common Symptoms of Peripheral Neuropathy?

Motor Symptoms

- Legs or arms feel heavy
- Tripping
- Difficulty lifting up foot or toes
- Difficulty picking up or holding objects, or manipulating them in your hand
- Difficulty using buttons
- Shaky handwriting

Sensory Symptoms

- Fingertips or toes feels like "pins and needles" or are numb
- Cold feeling in arm or leg
- Burning or "electrical" feeling
- Difficulty hearing
- Ringing in ears
- Vision changes

What Can I Do?

- If you experience **pain**, we may recommend medication, such as Elavil, or Neurotin. These medications interrupt the faulty nerve messages and may relieve the pain.
- It is important to take some simple precautions to ensure your safety:
 - **Avoid Falling.** Make sure your house is well lit. Cover all steps with a non-skid surface. Clear stairs and hall of objects. Use handrails. Tape down the edges of all throw rugs to avoid tripping. Bathtub/shower should have a non-skid surface.
 - **Protect your hands.** You may not know if your hands are hurt if your hands are numb. Test the temperature of the water. Be careful not to cut yourself. Use oven mitts. Wear gloves when working outside.
 - **Protect your feet.** Wear slippers or shoes at even around the house.