

What can I do about numbness and pain in my feet and legs?

How to manage symptoms of neuropathy and nerve damage

The feet are a sore point for many people with diabetes because nerve damage (neuropathy), along with poor circulation, tends to target them first. If you're having numbness, tingling, weakness, sensitivity or pain, you may already have some nerve damage. Talk with your doctor about it and what you can do to help manage these symptoms. It can be frustrating to deal with pain, but there are things you can do to feel better.

See your doctor

You may have a condition that can be treated with medication. A proper diagnosis is key to understanding how to treat what you're experiencing. The likely cause of these symptoms is either peripheral arterial disease, which is due to poor circulation, or peripheral neuropathy, due to nerve damage.

Here are some questions to ask yourself that may help your health care provider with a diagnosis:

- Do you have pain in your legs when you walk? If so, how far can you walk before you must stop to rest?
- Do your feet appear red or blue when they are lowered, and does the color go away when they're raised?
- Are your feet and legs often cold?
- Does hanging your leg over the side of the bed at night help to relieve the pain?
- Is only one leg affected by pain, and is this leg swollen, warm to the touch and reddish-brown in color?

A "yes" to any of these questions may mean peripheral arterial disease, and you should see your doctor right away. If you're not having the symptoms described in these questions, you're more likely experiencing signs of neuropathy.

Get screened for peripheral neuropathy

Neuropathy is an important quality-of-life issue for many people with diabetes. It can affect the hands and arms as well, but usually starts in the feet. The pain is often described as tingling, burning, sharp, shooting or stabbing. Other unpleasant symptoms include feeling like your feet and legs are numb, weak, dead, asleep or extremely sensitive to touch. The symptoms are often worse at night.

Neuropathy is not always caused by diabetes. Diagnosis by a doctor is important. All people with type 2 diabetes should be screened for peripheral neuropathy every year. People with type 1 should be screened five years after diagnosis and then yearly. It's also a good idea to get a complete foot exam from your doctor every year.

Control blood sugar

While there is not a cure for this complication of diabetes, keeping your blood sugar levels in goal range can help prevent peripheral neuropathy and keep it from getting worse. Try to avoid extreme fluctuations (highs and lows). Even after nerves become damaged, improving your blood sugar control may be able to help relieve symptoms. Meal planning, physical activity and medications, if needed, all can help.

Follow a healthy lifestyle

It's important to keep your body as healthy as possible. Take steps to improve cholesterol and blood pressure, avoid drinking too much alcohol and don't smoke. Stay physically active—it will help both your body and mind. Many people get depressed or down when they have nerve damage, but counseling and depression medication can help.

Take medication as prescribed

Many people need medication to manage painful symptoms. Talk with your doctor about what's available and best for you. Stay away from unproven remedies such as vitamin E or flaxseed oil. Always check with your doctor before taking any supplement to make sure it doesn't interfere with your medications.

More tips

- Tell your doctor about any new symptoms or problems and get treatment right away.
- Take good care of your feet and check them every day.
- Be careful when exercising. Some activities may not be good for people with neuropathy.
- Get special shoes if needed.
- Work with your health care team and diabetes educator to manage symptoms and prevent them from getting worse.