

What is Peripheral Neuropathy?

Peripheral neuropathy is a condition in which there is dysfunction of the nerves in the periphery of the body, including your limbs. This can affect movement and sensation in your limbs and cause dysfunction in other organs of the body.

The main causes are -:

- Diabetes
- Alcohol excess
- Nutritional deficiencies
- Toxins
- Chronic kidney disease
- Medication side effects
- Infections / Inflammation of the nerves
- Physical damage to certain nerves
- Cancer associated conditions
- Genetically mediated diseases

Symptoms of peripheral neuropathy may include -:

- Tingling and numbness in the hands and feet
- Sharp burning, stabbing, shooting type pains
- Weakness of the muscles in your hands and feet
- Problems with unsteadiness and balance
- Problems with bladder and bowel/gastrointestinal function (i.e., diarrhoea, constipation)
- Impotence

How is it diagnosed?

It is diagnosed mainly by your physician talking to you and examining you. Usually, blood tests will be carried out. In addition, nerve conduction testing may be performed. This test assesses the speed and capacity of the nerves, which will then help the doctor to narrow down the diagnosis. In rare occasions, a nerve or a skin biopsy will be needed, where a small part of nerve or skin will be removed under local anesthesia for evaluation.

Treatment/ Medication

Identifying and treating the underlying cause

- Identifying the underlying cause is an important aspect of the work up of patients with peripheral neuropathy.
- Your doctor will arrange tests to identify the underlying cause.
- Depending on the cause, your doctor will advise on the appropriate management, which may include the following -:
 - Maintaining strict control of blood sugar if diabetic
 - Avoiding alcohol intake
 - Improving nutrition
 - Stopping medications that may cause neuropathy
 - Starting on medication to treat infection or suppress the immune system and reduce inflammation

Symptomatic treatment

- For patients who have pain related to neuropathy, specific medications may be prescribed.
- The medications which are used for pain relief may be used for other conditions as well, such as epilepsy and depression/anxiety. However, taking these prescribed medications for pain does not mean that you have those other conditions.
- It is important to follow the instructions provided by your doctor carefully when taking these medications.
- Drowsiness is a common symptom experienced by some patients on commencement of these medications. This symptom usually resolves gradually with time, but if it is bothersome, discuss it with your doctor.

Foot care and prevention of complications

- Since neuropathy can reduce sensation in the hands and feet, vigilant self-care is extremely important to prevent injuries and complications.
- Regularly inspect your hands and feet for any cuts, sores, blisters, or other damage.
- Address any wounds or injuries as soon as detected, to prevent infections or more serious problems.
- You may also be referred for other therapies -:
 - Physiotherapy - to help with weakness and balance problems.
 - Occupational therapy - to help with obtaining adaptations to footwear, walking aids etc.