Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center

PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

Neuropathic Pain

This information explains the causes, symptoms, and treatment of neuropathic pain.

Neuropathic (NOOR-oh-PA-thik) pain is nerve pain. Nerves are like tiny wires that send messages between your brain and body. These messages help you move, talk, and feel sensations, such as touch, temperature, and pain.

Sometimes when your nerves get damaged (harmed), they send pain messages to your brain when they shouldn't. The pain you feel from this is neuropathic pain.

Neuropathic pain is often felt in your hands and feet. It can also be felt in other parts of your body.

What are the causes of neuropathic pain?

Some common causes of neuropathic pain are:

- Chemotherapy drugs. Examples are:
  - Cisplatin, Oxaliplatin (Eloxatin®), Carboplatin (Paraplatin®)
  - Paclitaxel (Taxol®), Docetaxel (Taxotere®), Cabazitaxel (Jevtana®)
  - Vincristine (Vincasar PFS®), Vinblastine (Alkaban-AQ®), Vinorelbine (Navelbine®)
  - Bortezomib (Velcade®), Carfilzomib (Kyprolis®)
  - Thalidomide (Thalomid®), Lenalidomide (Revlimid®)
  - Brentuximab vedotin (Adcetris®), Trastuzumab emtansine (Kadcyla®)
  - Eribulin (Halaven®), Ixabepilone (Ixempra®)

    - Cytarabine (high dose), Methotrexate (high dose)
- Radiation therapy
- Monoclonal antibodies. This is a type of protein that's made in a lab. It's used to treat certain cancers.
- A tumor pressing on a nerve
- Scar tissue that forms after surgery
- A new injury or wound
- Infections, such as the herpes zoster (shingles) virus
- Chronic conditions, such as diabetes

What are the symptoms of neuropathic pain?

Neuropathic pain can feel different for each person. It might even change from day to day.

Neuropathic pain does not feel like pain from a cut or scrape. It may feel like:

- Burning
- Cramping
- Zaps (tiny electric shocks)
- Numbness
- Squeezing
- Shooting pain
- Sharp stabs
- Tingling (feeling of "pins and needles")

For some people, a light touch (such as from loose clothing or bedsheets) may feel unpleasant on the skin. It may even feel painful. This is called allodynia (al-o-DIN-e-uh). Allodynia can happen with some neuropathic pain. For other people, any form of pressure (such as from socks, shoes, or tight clothing) can cause pain.

How do we assess your neuropathic pain?

Your doctor will ask you questions about your neuropathic pain, such as:

- How bad is your pain? Rate it from 0 (no pain) to 10 (worst pain ever).
- Where does it hurt?
- Does the pain stay in one spot, or does it move around?
- Is the pain always there, or does it come and go?
- How would you describe the pain?

To learn more about how to describe your pain, watch *How to Describe Your Cancer Pain* (www.mskcc.org/pe/describe-cancer-pain).

What are some treatments for neuropathic pain?

The main goals of treating neuropathic pain are to:

- Find and fix what is causing the pain, if possible.
- Help manage the pain.
- Help you get back to your usual activities.
- Make your quality of life better.

Medicines

Most people take 1 or more medicines to help treat neuropathic pain. Examples are:

- Anti-seizure medicines. If you're given a prescription for one of these, it doesn't mean you have a seizure disorder (such as epilepsy). These medicines help to calm the nerve(s) causing the pain.
- Antidepressants. If you're given a prescription for one of these, it doesn't mean you're depressed or being treated for depression. These medicines help to calm the nerve(s) causing the pain.
- Opioids (a strong prescription medicine used to treat pain)
- Topical and local anesthetics (medicines to numb your skin or a small area of your body)
- Steroid medicine

Important things to know

- Your doctor will tell you how to take your medicine.
- It may take up to 2 weeks for your medicine to start working.
- Your doctor may need to change your dose (how much medicine you take).
- You may need to try a few different medicines before finding what works best for you.

Nerve blocks

Some people get a nerve block to help treat neuropathic pain. A nerve block is an injection (shot) of medicine right into the nerve that hurts. This stops the nerve from sending pain messages to your brain. A pain specialist will give you the nerve block.

Contact information

Call the Anesthesia Pain Service if:

- You need to talk to someone about your pain control.
- You have any side effects after your treatment.
- You have any questions or concerns.

You can reach us Monday through Friday, from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., at 212-639-6851.

If it's after 4 p.m., during the weekend, or on a holiday, call 212-639-2000. Ask to talk with the anesthesia pain person on call.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

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