

Understanding Neuropathy

Neuropathy

Neuropathy is a side effect of normal cancer treatment. It may be caused by injury to nerves by the cancer medicines. If you have trouble feeling sensations as well as you did before cancer treatment, or if you are having trouble moving your muscles as well as you used to before the treatment, you might have neuropathy. Injury to nerves might happen several days after beginning therapy, or it may occur after several treatments.

Symptoms

Patients may have symptoms ranging from mild numbness or tingling in the hands or feet to severe pain and weakness. Symptoms might improve after treatment is finished, but for some patients, nerve damage is permanent. It is important for your health care provider to know if you are experiencing symptoms of neuropathy so that your discomfort can be treated or your therapy can be changed.

When to Call Your Health Care Provider

You should call your health care provider if you notice the following symptoms:

- numbness or tingling in your hands or feet
- discomfort in your hands or feet like a feeling of “pins and needles” or burning
- trouble buttoning your buttons, closing zippers, or placing keys in keyholes
- difficulty picking up objects
- inability to feel hot and cold
- motor weakness, heaviness in arms and legs (May notice difficulty lifting feet.)
- uncoordinated walk (gait); tendency to lean or fall to one side when standing
- changes in speech or slurring words
- hoarseness
- muscles drooping on one side of face
- vision changes, such as double vision
- hearing changes: hearing loss, ringing or buzzing in ears
- constipation, colicky abdominal pain
- inability to urinate or impotence.

Special Instructions

- Patients whose occupations require balance, driving, or climbing may be unsafe if neuropathy is severe.
- Patients with weakness or sensory problems may need to modify their homes: keep rooms well lit; remove tripping obstacles; protect fingers when cutting food.
- Patients with uncomfortable symptoms or pain may benefit from pain medicines. Ask your doctor if you have any questions about these.