

Massachusetts General Hospital BMT Survivorship Program

Tips for Managing Peripheral Neuropathy

What are peripheral nerves? What causes damage to them?

Peripheral nerves carry messages from the brain and spinal cord to the rest of the body. These nerves aid your senses, such as pain, touch, and temperature, as well as your movement. Cancer treatment, infection or other health conditions, such as chronic Graft Versus Host Disease (GVHD), can damage your peripheral nerves, causing pain and discomfort. This is often referred to as peripheral neuropathy, or PN.

What is it like to have PN?

PN may cause you to feel or experience: numbness, tingling, pins and needles, burning, electrical shocks, cramping, sensitivity to temperature or touch, loss of reflexes, muscle wasting, weakness, loss of balance, and falls.

Damaged peripheral nerves are able to heal! For some patients, symptoms stay the same or get worse over time. Others may have partial or full resolution of symptoms. This process may take months to years.

If you have been told by your BMT care team that you have PN, you need to protect yourself.

You can:

Create a safe home environment for yourself

- Your home should be well lit so that you can see clearly at night, most falls occur in poorly lit areas
- Free your floors of scatter rugs and clutter
- Your stairs should have handrails on both sides. Be well lit. Please wear non-skid shoes when navigating stairs
- Your shower or tub should have non-skid strips. Have a handy man install shower grips.
Get a non-breakable thermometer to check water temperature

Use medical supplies to help with daily activities

- Open jars with a plastic gripper; be cautious with can openers and gripping knives
- Health supply stores offer special equipment to help you dress, button, pull zippers, and pick items up off the floor. You may require the use of a walker or cane
- Control your blood glucose; diabetes can significantly worsen the symptoms of PN
- After your daily shower, massage your hands and feet with hydrolatum cream to relieve stiffness and help your skin feel better

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Wear the right protection on your hands and feet

- Wear sturdy shoes with a solid no-skid sole
- Wear gloves and warm socks in the cold

Exercise

- Walking and range of motion exercises 3-5 times a week is an important way to maintain muscle strength and balance

Manage your pain

- Pain may be managed in a variety of ways: over the counter or prescription pain medication, anti-convulsant or anti-depressants, newer combination topical agents and B-Vitamins, or in rare cases with surgery
- Use complementary therapies to manage PN such as:
 - physical and occupational therapy
 - massage
 - acupuncture
 - dietitians (for diabetes control) and
 - palliative care (to help with pain management)
- Talk to your BMT Care Team about which medications and therapies may be right for you

Mass General Resources

Physical Therapy

617-726-2961

MGH Occupational Therapy

617-726-2960

Katherine Gallagher Integrative Therapies

Yoga, acupuncture, massage

617-726-4178

Nutrition Services

617-724-4000