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## Patient information

# Diabetes and Peripheral Neuropathy

Medical Department – Diabetes Centre

## What is Neuropathy?

This is damage of the nerves in the hands and feet, and diabetes is the commonest cause for it. It is a progressive disease that mainly affects the peripheral sensory nerves in the hands and the feet, but damage to the nerves that supply the gut, heart and endocrine glands can also happen.

In its early stages neuropathy often causes no symptoms. Symptoms resulting from loss of nerve function can have a serious impact on quality of life. The main symptoms in the hands and feet are:

- Sensory loss.
- Neuropathic (nerve) pain.

**Chronic painful neuropathy** can cause burning, shooting, stabbing pain; pins and needles; some absence of sensation; reduced reflexes

**Acute painful neuropathy** can cause the same symptoms as above but can happen suddenly or after starting insulin therapy.

### **Painless neuropathy with sensory loss can cause:**

- Numbness.
- Deadness of the feet or no symptoms with presence of painless injury.
- Reduced sensation.
- Reduced thermal sensitivity (loss of sensitivity to heat and cold).
- Absent reflexes.

## **These symptoms can lead to**

- Reduced manual dexterity.
- Walking difficulties.
- Reduced lifting and carrying capacity.
- Sleep disturbance.
- Depression.
- Physical harm.
- Foot ulceration.

Incidence has been shown to increase with advancing age and duration of diabetes.

## **How do you test for Neuropathy?**

You should have your feet examined on a yearly basis. This examination will include testing the response of the nerves using a small plastic filament, tuning fork or a reflex hammer.

## **What is the treatment for Neuropathy?**

- Care of the affected area with regular checks to make sure that shoes have not been rubbing and bath water etc is the right temperature. (See Diabetes Foot Education Risk factor 2 leaflet)
- Improving diabetes control
- Aspirin and paracetamol may help. Other types of medication are also used. It may need considerable time and trials of different medication to find an effective treatment.

Antidepressants and antiepileptic drugs medications are commonly used to control neuropathic pain.

- **Antidepressants.** Drugs such as amitriptyline, imipramine and duloxetine are used not just to treat depression but for their effect on the pain.
  - Pain relief often takes several months.
  - These tablets are effective in about 70% of cases.
  - Side effects do occur in some people. The main ones are sedation, a drop in blood pressure when standing up causing some light-headedness, dry mouth, nausea, vomiting, constipation and difficulty in passing urine.
  - These drugs may be combined with other tablets.
- **Antiepileptics.** These drugs are not used because you have epilepsy but they are useful in treating the pain of neuropathy.
  - Carbamazepine is effective in 60% of people with diabetes with peripheral neuropathy. The main side effects with carbamazepine are nausea, dizziness, drowsiness, headache and an unsteady walk.
  - Gabapentin. This drug is used to treat neuropathy to good effect. The starting dose is usually low and increased to 1800mg per day in three divided doses. The main side effects are dizziness and drowsiness.
  - Pregabalin. This drug is also used to treat neuropathy to good effect. The starting dose is usually 150mgs in two to three divided doses and increased to 600mg per day. The main side effects are dizziness and drowsiness.

- **Capsaicin.** This is made from hot chilli peppers. It is not effective in severe pain but may be useful when combined with some of the tablets mentioned.
- Surprisingly, wrapping the affected area in cling film at night can help.
- If the pain has started after going on to insulin it could be due to the re-growth of small nerve fibres after the blood sugar control has improved.
- Tight control of your diabetes should be continued, after good control for three to nine months the may pain eventually settle.
- In general when you have been pain free for three months your doctor may gradually reduce the dose of the medication.

If you have further questions about neuropathy please discuss this with your doctor or diabetes team.

## **Further information**

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