



## Managing Neuropathies After Cancer Treatment

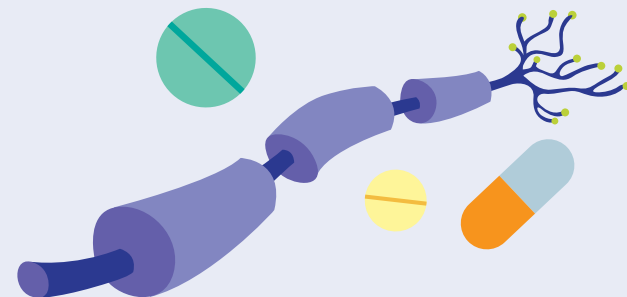
- Persistent localized numbness, prickling/tingling, hot/cold, itching/burning sensations, often painful are called Neuropathies
- Neuropathies indicate damage to one or more sensory nerves that carry messages to the brain
- Normal sensations in affected body parts are altered, sometimes dulled, sometimes sensitized
  - This can affect use of the body part involved

## What is a Neuropathy?

### What Causes Neuropathies?

Neuropathies happen when:

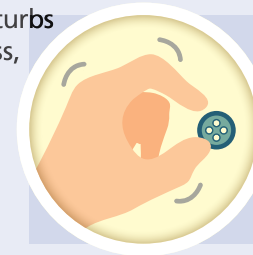
- Penetrating injury, pressure, or chemical damage to the nerve causes it to malfunction
- Cancer chemotherapy damages peripheral nerves, usually in the hands and feet
- Peripheral (not in the brain) nerves are slow growing, taking many months to recover, but they eventually do



## Impact of Cancer-Related Neuropathies

Cancer-related neuropathy usually affect the extremities of the arms and legs as follows:

- feet/toes - reduced sensation disturbs standing balance and steadiness, increasing risk of falls
- hands/fingers - difficulty with fine finger movements, such as fastening buttons and writing
- More generally,
  - Difficulty in judging temperature, risk of burns
  - Different uncomfortable sensations, (burning, stinging, stabbing), itching, vibrating or tingling sensations, interfering with normal activities
- These are distressing, causing tiredness and depression, especially with interference of normal daily activities



## Managing My Neuropathies?

1. What you need to know about neuropathies:
  - a. They can take many months to heal
  - b. We can't "switch off" neuropathies. Medication may help with managing severe pain. Most resolve within 1-2 years
  - c. Over time, the brain adjusts to the damaged nerve input, "tuning out" the sensations, so they become "background" or invisible
  - d. Try to accept the neuropathy as temporary and otherwise live as normally as possible, allowing you to do other things which helps to manage the neuropathy

### 2. Follow an active lifestyle:

- a. Exercise regularly. This helps heal the body, encouraging nerve growth and regeneration
- b. Have a regular and adequate pattern of sleep. Tiredness can intensify neuropathies (as it is harder to ignore)
- c. Eat a healthy, mostly vegetable-based diet, (tofu, beans, legumes) and less animal protein
- d. Minimize psychological stress and try to keep positive. Be patient and avoid "catastrophic" thinking about the problem

### 3. Temperature:

- a. Avoid temperature extremes (too hot or cold), which affect blood flow and can alter sensation and risk burns
- b. Experiment with warm and cool packs on the affected area to see if they offer relief

### 4. Massage:

- a. Massaging the affected area can help to improve circulation and help stimulate both muscle and nerve growth
- b. Keep using the affected area as much as possible to avoid any muscle loss in the limb. If you are able to use the limb as normally as possible, this also helps



### 5. Safety:

- a. If you have severe loss of sensation in hands or feet, wear gloves and thick socks/slippers/ indoor shoes around the house to help protect against injury
- b. If you cannot judge temperature, either pre-set the water heater temperature to no more than 48 degrees Centigrade, or ask a family member to test the water temperature before doing things like washing dishes and clothes
- c. Be especially vigilant when cooking and using sharp objects, to avoid burns and stab/cut injuries
- d. Do not drive if you cannot feel the foot pedals
- e. Avoid working at heights or using a steps/ladders, particularly if having sensation loss in your legs/feet, or have balance difficulties
- f. Ensure good lighting at night and ensure no trip hazards remain if unsteady on your feet

### 6. Psychological responses:

Neuropathies can be distressing. Affected people can become down or depressed. If you feel you are becoming depressed:

- a. Talk with your family and friends if you are finding certain things difficult. They may be able to suggest solutions to problems
- b. If you feel panicked or anxious about your neuropathy, or feel you are becoming depressed, talk to your oncologist, or call **HKU Jockey Club Institute of Cancer Care** on **3917 9606**

<http://jcicc.med.hku.hk/>

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