

Safety Tips for Peripheral Neuropathy Caused by Cancer Treatment

Peripheral neuropathy is a side effect that may happen when you take anti-cancer or chemotherapy medicines. In some cases it can also be caused by surgery, radiation treatments or the cancer itself. Common symptoms may include pain, numbness, loss of feeling or tingling in your hands or feet, trouble using your fingers to button shirts or tie shoes or changes in your balance or ability to walk. You may also have other symptoms from your peripheral neuropathy.

For your safety, these symptoms may cause you to change how you do certain activities. You may need to give yourself more time and move slower than you did before you had peripheral neuropathy. Here are some tips you may find helpful to make your home and place of work as safe as possible.

Lights

- Make sure your rooms and walkways are well lit and you have a clear view of where you are going to step. Keep a flashlight within reach to use when there is not enough lighting.
- Turn lights on **before** you enter a room. The room should be bright enough for you to see all the areas where you walk or do activities.
- Have a night light in your room and along the path you may walk during the night if you get up to use the bathroom.
- Turn on the lights outside of your home if you plan to go out, so your walk is well lit when you return.

Room Checks

Look in each room of your house to make sure they are free of hazards. Also check the garage, the yard, your car, and your place of work to make sure that they are safe.

This handout is for informational purposes only. Talk with your doctor or health care team if you have any questions about your care.

Stairs

- Clear stairs and hallways of objects, such as toys, clutter and rugs that may slip.
- Put handrails on both sides of the stairs. These handrails should go past the top and bottom stair. Try not to carry anything or carry as little as possible when taking the stairs.

Floors

- Floors should have non-glare and non-skid surfaces. Use rugs that have a non-slip backing.
- Tape or tack down raised carpet edges.
- Remove loose rugs, small area rugs, torn carpet or cords that may cause you to trip.
- Use tape to secure any extension cords that may be on the floor. Tape these cords along the edge of the floor (near the wall).
- Clear clutter from walkways.
- Be careful when you walk into another area that has different flooring (such as going from carpeted area to tile).
- Wipe up wet spots, spills or food right away.

Furniture

- Do not hold onto furniture to help you walk as it may slide or move. Remove wheels from chairs, tables, night stands, or over-bed tables.
- Remove or place protective covers on furniture with sharp edges or corners.

Bathroom

- Do not walk on slippery, wet floors.
- Use non-skid strips or mats in tubs and showers.
- Place grab bars near the toilet, shower or tub.
- Use portable over-the-tub hand grips or install shower grab bars.
- Make sure your water heater is set at 110 degrees Fahrenheit or below.
- Use liquid soap, soap on a rope or a wash mitt to hold your soap.

Kitchen

- Use rubber gloves to clean or wash dishes.
- Make sure your water heater is set at 110 degrees Fahrenheit or below.
- Use lightweight, non-breakable glasses, utensils and plates.
- Protect your fingers when cutting foods.
- Use easy jar openers, grippers, or tab grabbers to open jars or soda cans.
- Use pot holders and oven mitts to handle hot items.

Garage or Yard

- Clean up oil spills with sand or kitty litter.
- Store rakes, shovels, and other garden equipment off the floor.
- Place nails, screws, and other hardware in containers with lids.
- Always wear rubber shoes or work boots when you work in the garage or garden.
- Be careful with yard and garage equipment such as lawn mowers, branch trimmers, electric saws and snow blowers. If possible, ask others to do these jobs for you.

Exercise and Massage

- Moving your hands (like making a fist or squeezing a washcloth) can help reduce hand stiffness.
- Walking is good exercise and helps keep your muscles flexible.
- Low-back stretches and calf stretches can also help keep your muscles flexible.
- If you exercise in a gym, tell the trainer that you have peripheral neuropathy. Ask what equipment you can use safely to help you keep your muscles toned.
- Foot and hand massages may help relieve stiffness. Clean the lotion or cream off your hands and feet when the massage is done.

General Safety Tips

- **To reduce your risk of infection, check your feet each day. Use a hand mirror to look carefully at the top and bottom of your feet when you are sitting down. It will help you to see blisters, sores, cuts or splinters in your feet that you may not be able to feel due to your peripheral neuropathy.** Call your doctor for directions on how to take care of your feet if this happens.
- Wear shoes that fit well. Choose shoes that have closed toes and closed heels.
- Wear clean white socks made of natural fibers such as cotton, silk or wool.
- Use adapted nail clippers to make it easier to cut your nails. These are available at health supply stores. You may find it helpful to have a podiatrist care for your feet and toenails.
- Wear gloves and warm socks in cold weather. Wear a face mask outside when the air temperature is cold.
- Ask your doctor if your symptoms could make it unsafe for you to drive a car (such as if you are not able to feel the steering wheel, gas or brake pedals).
- If you are not able to be active and spend a lot of time sitting or lying down there is a need for special care of your skin. It is important to know that your weight can put pressure on your skin in bony areas of your body. A caregiver needs to check your skin to make sure you have no red or purple areas, sores or blisters developing. You may not be able to feel these sore areas as they are forming. It is important to change positions often to prevent these problems.

Other Resources

Talk to your doctor if activities are difficult for you. Your doctor may suggest that you see a physical therapist or occupational therapist. Your ability to drive may need to be evaluated by a rehabilitation specialist.

- Physical therapists can provide exercises and activities to help with walking, balance, coordination and pain. These treatments lower your risk of falls and help prevent injury.
- Occupational therapists can work with you on pain management techniques and your fine motor skills. They can show you easier ways to do daily activities that may have become difficult, such as how to use special equipment to help put on clothes.

- Special equipment is available at health supply stores to help you dress. Examples of equipment you may find useful are: zipper pulls, buttoners, molded sock aids, elastic shoe laces, Velcro straps, instep supports for slippers and shoes, cuff and collar extenders, and lightweight dressing sticks to put on garments without bending.
- Special pens, pencils and utensils are available to help you hold these objects more easily.
- Wear jewelry that you can put on without help (such as those with magnetic fasteners).

Call your doctor or a member of your health care team for any of the following:

- Burns, sores, blisters or cuts on the body that may seem infected or will not heal
- Signs of infection such as redness, swelling, drainage or in some cases a fever
- If you have fallen or have injuries that need medical care

Adapted from: Patient Guide to Peripheral Neuropathy, Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center

For more information on Peripheral Neuropathy Caused by Cancer Treatment, we encourage you to visit our video library at <http://cancer.osu.edu/patientvideos>.