

Peripheral Neuropathy

Overview: Peripheral neuropathy is a burning or aching pain due to nerve diseases. The pain can either be constant or intermittent and most often occurs in the arms or legs; however, it has been known to occur in the trunk, abdomen, head and neck. The pain can occur from irritation of one nerve or from several nerves. Generally, peripheral neuropathies are a consequence of diabetes, alcoholism or other neurological diseases.

Diagnosis: Doctors will use a physical examination to confirm the area involved. Neurological examinations can sometimes reveal loss of sensation to pinprick or to hot and cold temperatures. Weakness is sometimes noted in the affected extremity. Reflexes may be affected and there may be changes in the skin over the region. Evaluations of peripheral neuropathies usually involve tests appropriate for the primary disease, which doctors suspect is causing the problem such as diabetes. Evidence of nerve damage can sometimes be demonstrated with electrical nerve testing. Doctors who treat the pain as peripheral neuropathy will often use a nerve block procedure to help diagnose the problem.

Treatment: For some patients with peripheral neuropathy, the use of oral nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory medications along with traditional pain medications can be helpful. For others, special medications help directly with nerve pain. These medications are often started at low doses and gradually increased until the desired effects are reached. Long-term relief can often be obtained with the use of therapeutic nerve blocks. These include injections of anesthetic medications along with anti-inflammatory medication around the painful nerves. The injections are usually performed in a short series over several weeks until symptoms subside or a plateau is reached in the treatment. If helpful, these injections can be repeated at appropriate intervals.

Nerve stimulation techniques can be helpful in certain types of peripheral neuropathy. Stimulation can either occur on the skin over the affected region, or in some cases, with stimulator electrodes placed surgically around the nerves or in the spine at the origin of the affected nerves. Although physical therapy is not usually helpful in relieving the pain from peripheral neuropathy, therapeutic exercises can help restore loss of function and allow patients to lead more active lives. In addition, behavioral modification techniques or biofeedback training with muscle relaxation exercises can help patients be less sensitive to the irritation from the affected nerves.