

CANCER TREATMENT & PERIPHERAL NEUROPATHY

PATIENT/FAMILY INFORMATION SHEET

What is Peripheral Neuropathy?

Neuropathy is irritation or damage to nerves. Damaged sensory nerves do not accurately “sense” heat, cold, pressure, pain and body position. Mild peripheral neuropathy is expected during treatment with certain chemotherapy agents.

What causes peripheral neuropathy and how long will it last?

Certain chemotherapy medications can damage peripheral nerves, especially with higher doses or after multiple doses. The most common chemotherapy medications that may cause peripheral neuropathy are: Vincristine, Vinblastine, Taxol, Taxotere, Navelbine, Velcade, Thalidomide, Cisplatin, and Oxaliplatin. Radiation therapy to the spine or other tissues can cause neuropathy by radiating the nerves. In addition, the cancer itself can cause nerve damage, especially if the tumor is close to a particular nerve.

Although some of the signs of neuropathy may appear suddenly, this change in sensation usually builds gradually and gets worse with each subsequent dose of chemotherapy. For most people, symptoms due to treatment may improve or resolve within 6 – 12 months. Some people do experience these symptoms for a longer period of time.

What are the common symptoms of peripheral neuropathy?

When neuropathy occurs, one or several of your peripheral nerves have difficulty sensing information. This may lead to symptoms such as weakness, pain, imbalance, numbness, or dizziness. Speak with your doctor or nurse if you have any of the following symptoms:

- Numbness, tingling (feeling of pins and needles) of hands and/or feet
- Burning sensation of hands and/or feet
- Constipation
- Loss of sensation to touch
- Loss of positional sense (knowing where a body part is without looking)
- Weakness and leg cramping or any pain in hands and/or feet
- Difficulty picking things up or buttoning clothes

What can be done about peripheral neuropathy?

If you have symptoms of peripheral neuropathy, you should notify your doctor. Your doctor and nurse will ask you about symptoms of neuropathy prior to each chemotherapy treatment and monitor for increase in symptoms. Chemotherapy treatment may need to be interrupted or the dose adjusted to prevent worsening of this side effect. Your doctor may order a medication to help manage the pain and discomfort associated with peripheral neuropathy. Other treatment may include:

- Therapy to enhance your balance, strength, and safety.
- Therapy to enhance fine motor coordination, such as writing or buttoning your clothes.
- Home safety evaluation to adapt your home to account for the changes in your situation.

Since peripheral neuropathy may affect your mobility and ability to sense temperature, it is important to take some safety precautions such as the following:

- Keep your rooms and stairs well lit so you do not fall
- Remove throw rugs
- Cover all steps with a non-skid surface
- Clear stairs and hall of clutter
- Cover bathtub/shower surfaces with non-skid matting
- Test the temperature of water with an area of your body not affected by the neuropathy
- Use pot holders when cooking
- Protect areas where sensation is decreased, such as wearing thick socks and soft-soled shoes for feet
- Do not walk bare foot
- Inspect skin for cuts, abrasions, burns daily; especially on arms, legs, toes and fingers

For more information on peripheral neuropathy speak with your nurse or doctor. Additional information can also be found at:

Oncology Nursing Society website at:

<http://cancersymptoms.org/peripheralneuropathy/index.html>

For more Patient Fact Sheets, see the Greenwich Hospital web site at www.greenhosp.org and Click on Patients & Visitors, then Patient Education