

Diabetic Neuropathy

What is Diabetic Neuropathy?

Diabetic Neuropathy is a condition that affects the nerves in your feet and lower legs. It is the most common and troublesome complication of diabetes.

Diabetic Neuropathy usually develops in people who have had high blood glucose (sugar) levels for many years. The symptoms develop slowly over time.

Diabetic Neuropathy usually causes a loss of feeling in your feet and lower legs (the same on both sides of your body). You may be less able to feel heat, cold, touch and pain. As a result, you may not notice:

- When you step on something sharp
- When your feet touch something that is too hot or cold
- That you have a cut or blister

If Diabetic Neuropathy is severe, you may develop:

- Weakness and foot drop (difficulty lifting your foot while walking)
- Foot ulcers and a greater risk of amputation

There is no cure for Diabetic Neuropathy, but supportive treatment can help you manage the symptoms. To prevent further nerve damage, it is important to keep your blood glucose levels in the target range set by your diabetes care providers.

What are the symptoms of Diabetic Neuropathy?

The symptoms of Diabetic Neuropathy include:

- Tingling, burning or pain in your toes and feet
- Loss of feeling in your toes, feet and lower legs. The skin may become numb. Some people lose feeling in their fingers and hands as well.
- Tripping over objects more easily

What causes Diabetic Neuropathy?

Diabetic Neuropathy occurs when blood glucose levels are not well-controlled for many years. This damages the nerves in your body, particularly in the foot and lower leg.

These things may increase your chance of developing Diabetic Neuropathy:

- Poor blood glucose control
- Having diabetes for a long time
- Aging
- Being male
- Drinking alcohol
- Smoking or using tobacco
- High blood pressure (hypertension)
- High amounts of fats in the blood (hyperlipidemia)
- Certain genetic factors

How do you know I have Diabetic Neuropathy?

Your doctor or specialist can tell if you have Diabetic Neuropathy from:

- Talking to you about your symptoms and past medical history
- A physical exam to see how well your muscles and nerves are working
- Reviewing the results of tests

Tests for Diabetic Neuropathy include:

- Nerve conduction studies and Electromyography. These tests measure the electrical activity in your muscles and nerves.
- Skin biopsy. Removing a tiny sample of skin from your lower leg and/or foot to examine under a microscope.

How is Diabetic Neuropathy treated?

Treatment for Diabetic Neuropathy focuses on good blood glucose control.

Keeping your blood glucose within your target range may prevent or slow the progress of diabetes complications, including nerve damage.

Talk with your diabetes team about managing your diabetes and the target range for your blood glucose levels.

To manage your diabetes:

- Eat healthy meals and snacks.
- Enjoy regular physical activity, which can help with blood glucose control.
- Check your blood glucose level regularly using a home glucose meter. (Your diabetes care providers will let you know how often to do this) Keep a record of the results in your meter's memory or write them down.
- Review your results to see if your blood glucose is high or low at certain times, and how food, activity and medications affect your blood glucose.
- Take insulin as prescribed by your doctor

To treat pain in your feet and legs, your doctor may prescribe neuropathic pain medication or treatment with an anti-oxidant supplement such as alpha-lipoic acid.

If you have less feeling in your feet, they may not heal very well. So it is very important to care for your feet. This can prevent small problems from becoming more serious. Caring for your feet includes:

- Checking your feet each day.
- Getting foot exams when you see your doctor, or at a foot care clinic.
- Wearing socks and shoes that protect your feet from injury. Ask your diabetes team if you need help choosing the right footwear.

If you have questions about Diabetic Neuropathy or your care, please speak with your health care team at the Neuromuscular Clinic.

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