

# Neuropathy advice leaflet

## **What is Neuropathy?**

The term Neuropathy is used to describe nerve damage. As well as being associated with diabetes, it can be caused by other conditions, e.g. not getting enough vitamins and minerals from your diet, alcoholism, back injuries etc. Diabetic Peripheral Neuropathy affects the areas of the body at the extremity (i.e. those furthest away), such as the legs & feet. Nerves carry messages back and forth between the brain and other parts of the body, so neuropathy (damage to these nerves) causes interruption to this system and stops information traveling from the muscles, skin, and blood vessels back to the brain. This can lead to serious complications for those with diabetes.

There are 3 types of diabetic peripheral neuropathy:

- Sensory (where you lose the ability to detect sensations such as touch, heat, cold and pain).
- Motor (where you lose muscle strength and develop foot deformities).
- Autonomic (where you lose regulatory functions of such things as sweating).

## **What causes Diabetic Neuropathy?**

Despite research, there is no conclusive proof as to the cause; however there are factors that are known to contribute to the condition. High blood sugar (hyperglycaemia) causes chemical changes in nerves and this weakens their ability to transmit signals. High blood glucose also damages the blood vessels that carry oxygen & nutrients to the nerves.

## **How will I know if I have Diabetic Neuropathy?**

Your healthcare provider should carry out an assessment every year, to check for signs of neuropathy. You may not realize that you have nerve damage, as the symptoms often begin gradually.

## **What symptoms can I expect?**

Numbness or inability to feel pain or temperature. This is a problem because pain can be a useful signal of injury. It is possible that you could sustain a wound from standing on something sharp, stepping into a hot bath or wearing ill-fitting shoes etc. without knowing it.

- Tingling, prickling, burning, shooting pains, feeling as if walking on cotton wool and in some cases an extreme sensitivity to even the lightest touch.
- You think that your feet are cold, although they are warm to the touch.
- Poor function of your sweat glands, leading to reduced sweating and consequent drying out and cracking of the skin - which may lead to infection and ulceration.
- Muscle wasting and weakness leading to foot deformity, loss of balance and poor mobility.
- You may develop skin problems such as callus, corns, ulcers and infections as a consequence of your joints changing and new pressure areas arising.



It is important, in addition to any other foot care advice to:

**Check your shoes**-check your shoes before you put them onto make sure nothing sharp has pierced the outer sole. Also, run your hand inside each shoe to check that no small objects such as stones have fallen in.

**Avoid very hot baths**- put cold water in first then add hot water and test with your elbow or ask someone else to check for you. If your feet are cold wear socks. NEVER sit with your feet in front of a fire to warm them. Always remove hot water bottles or heating pads from your bed before getting in as they can burn you without you feeling it.

## Can neuropathy be treated?

Neuropathy can be one of the most frustrating & debilitating complications of diabetes because of the pain, discomfort and disability it can cause and because available treatments are not always successful.

The progression of the condition can be slowed or halted by maintaining good blood sugar control, getting regular exercise & keeping your weight under control. **ALCOHOL, CAFFEINE and SMOKING** can make symptoms worse.

Podiatry Service. Referral and Booking Management Centre, Bensham Hospital, Gateshead NE8 4YL. 0191 4458401.

## Data Protection

Any personal information is kept confidential. There may be occasions where your information needs to be shared with other care professionals to ensure you receive the best care possible.

In order to assist us to improve the services available, your information may be used for clinical audit, research, teaching and anonymised for National NHS Reviews and Statistics.

Further information is available via Gateshead Health NHS Foundation Trust website (<https://www.qegateshead.nhs.uk/fairprocessing>) or by contacting the Data Protection Officer by telephone on 0191 445 8418 or by email [ghnt.ig.team@nhs.net](mailto:ghnt.ig.team@nhs.net).

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