



What is neuropathic pain?

Neuropathic pain is any pain caused by damage to or dysfunction of the nervous system (the nerves, the spinal cord or the brain). It may result from a number of conditions, including diabetes, herpes, cancer, surgery, multiple sclerosis, a stroke, a spinal cord injury, and many others.

How common is neuropathic pain?

Chronic neuropathic pain affects 3% of the population—about a million Canadians. However, its prevalence is increasing as our population ages since some of the common causes of neuropathic pain occur most often in the elderly.

Who is affected by neuropathic pain?

Not all conditions are equally likely to cause neuropathic pain. For example, neuropathic pain is experienced by a third of cancer patients, but only 8% of stroke patients in the year after their stroke. Up to a quarter of diabetics may develop it, but only 7% of people with lower back pain.

How to prevent neuropathic pain?

Prevention of neuropathic pain depends on its cause. For example, in a person who has developed shingles, using certain antiviral drugs within 3 days of the rash appearing can make the pain go away sooner. Unfortunately, this is an exception: at present there is no way to prevent most neuropathic pain from occurring.

What are the signs and symptoms?

The symptoms of neuropathic pain are different from those of other kinds of pain. Neuropathic pain can cause numbness, a burning sensation, sensitivity to touch, tingling, shooting pain and a feeling of being electrically shocked. Sometimes the skin becomes discoloured or swelling may occur.

How is the disease diagnosed?

The diagnosis of neuropathic pain is primarily based on symptoms and the results of a physical exam. It is usually straightforward to diagnose in a person with diabetes or recent shingles or other known causes of neuropathic pain. Other types may be harder to identify.

How is neuropathic pain treated?

There are many types of medications that can help relieve neuropathic pain, but no single answer: different pains may respond differently to various medications. Most often, a doctor will start treatment with either a kind of antidepressant called a tricyclic antidepressant or a drug used to prevent seizures, called an anticonvulsant. Although these medications were not originally developed to treat neuropathic pain, they have been found to work in many neuropathic pain patients. If they don't work, there are many other kinds of medications that can be tried.

Some types of neuropathic pain can be relieved by treating the condition that is causing them. For example, people with diabetes can reduce their neuropathic complications by controlling their blood sugar levels more carefully.



Exercise, diet and relaxation techniques can also help, as can physiotherapy or electrical nerve stimulation in certain cases.

Living with neuropathic pain

Some tips:

- Talk to your doctor freely about your symptoms and participate in decisions about your treatment choices
- Discover your own ways to relax and “de-stress”
- Take your medication as your doctor prescribed it, even if your symptoms change
- Talk to other people with neuropathic pain—see below for some places to start
- Exercise at a mild or moderate level (after checking with your doctor)

Resources

Patient Associations

- [ACTION Atlantic For People with Chronic Pain](#)
- [ACTION Ontario For People with Neuropathic Pain](#)
- [ACTION For People with Neuropathic Pain \(West\)](#)
- [Calgary Neuropathy Association](#)
- [Canadian Pain Coalition](#)
- [Chronic Pain Association of Canada](#)
- [Canadian Neuropathy Association](#)
- [Canadian Diabetes Association](#)

Congresses

- [Canadian Pain Society](#)
- [Canadian Institute for the Relief of Pain and Disability](#)

Disease awareness site(s)

- [Canadian Diabetes Association](#)
- [Canadian Pain Coalition](#)
- [Canadian Neuropathy Association](#)