Neuropathy During Cancer Treatment

Neuropathy can happen during cancer treatment for several reasons. Track timing and severity, use care-team-approved self-care, and contact the care team right away for new or worsening nerve symptoms. Call 911 for trouble breathing or swallowing, sudden weakness, or back pain with leg weakness or bowel or bladder changes.

The short answer

Neuropathy means nerve irritation or damage. It can cause numbness, tingling, burning pain, or weakness. It can also cause balance problems and changes in fine motor tasks. Some cancer treatments are more likely to cause it than others.

This page is for people with nerve symptoms during cancer treatment and the people who help them. It is a planning aid. It cannot diagnose the cause of a symptom. It cannot replace the instructions from your oncology team.

Why the care team takes it seriously

Nerve symptoms can affect safety, walking, sleep, buttoning clothes, writing, and the risk of falls. Reporting early helps the team match symptoms to the treatment plan. It also helps them rule out other causes.

Side effects are often easier to handle when the team hears about them early. If your team already gave you an urgent call plan, use that plan first.

What it feels like

NCI groups the symptoms by which nerves are affected.

Sensory nerves help you feel pain, heat, cold, and pressure. Damage can cause "tingling, numbness, or a pins-and-needles feeling in your feet and hands that may spread to your legs and arms." It can also cause an inability to feel hot or cold — "such as a hot stove" — and an inability to feel pain, "such as from a cut or sore on your foot."

Motor nerves move your muscles. Damage can cause weak or achy muscles that make you lose your balance, trip easily, or struggle to button a shirt or open a jar. Muscles may twitch and cramp. If chest or throat muscles are affected, swallowing or breathing can become difficult.

Autonomic nerves control things you do not think about, such as blood pressure, digestion, heart rate, temperature, and urination. Damage can cause constipation or diarrhea, dizziness or

faintness from low blood pressure, sexual problems, too much or too little sweating, and trouble emptying your bladder or leaking urine.

Details that help the team respond

- Where symptoms are: fingers, toes, feet, hands, face, or another area.
- Numbness, tingling, burning, electric pain, weakness, cramps, or balance changes.
- New trouble walking, falls, buttoning, texting, writing, or holding objects.
- Treatment name, other health conditions, or prior nerve problems.
- Whether symptoms are stable, improving, or spreading.

Questions to ask

- What is the most likely cause in my situation, and what else needs to be ruled out?
- Which symptoms or changes mean same-day contact for my exact treatment?
- What information should I track before I call or come in?
- Could this affect treatment timing, dose, or supportive medicines?
- Who should I contact after hours, and what should I say first?

How this can affect the treatment plan

The plan may include symptom management and fall-prevention steps. It may include physical therapy or a medicine review. It may also mean checking for other causes. Ask which symptoms could become long-lasting.

Ask what result or symptom pattern would change the plan. Ask what can be watched, and what should not wait until the next routine visit.

Staying safe when your feet are numb

Numb feet cannot warn you about a step, a sharp object, or hot water. NCI advises:

- **Prevent falls.** Move rugs out of your path. Put rails on walls and in the bathroom. Use bathmats in the shower or tub. Wear sturdy shoes with soft soles. Get up slowly after sitting or lying down, especially if you feel dizzy.
- **Take extra care in the kitchen and shower.** Use potholders. Be careful with knives and sharp objects. Ask someone to check the water temperature to make sure it is not too hot.
- **Protect your hands and feet.** Wear shoes indoors as well as outdoors. Check your arms, legs, and feet for cuts or scratches every day. Dress warmly in cold weather.
- **Ask for help and slow down.** Let people help with difficult tasks, and give yourself more time.

What treatment exists, and what is still uncertain

You may be prescribed pain medicine. NCI says acupuncture, massage, physical therapy, and yoga are sometimes advised as well, and that your team can tell you what fits your situation.

The evidence here is weaker than many patients expect. NCI's Cancer Pain PDQ summary states plainly that "studies of drugs and natural products used to treat CIPN have shown mixed results." No treatment reliably reverses the nerve damage itself.

NCI notes that "in some people, CIPN may continue after chemotherapy has ended."

What not to assume

- Do not assume a symptom is "just treatment" without checking the plan your team gave you.
- Do not assume the same symptom means the same thing for every cancer treatment.
- Do not start a new over-the-counter medicine, supplement, or major diet change without asking the care team when symptoms are active.

When to get help sooner

Do not wait for your next visit with new or worsening nerve symptoms. Some need emergency care.

- **Call 911 or go to the nearest emergency department if** you have trouble breathing or trouble swallowing. NCI lists both as signs that motor nerves are affected. Do not drive yourself.
- **Call 911 or go to the nearest emergency department if** weakness or numbness comes on suddenly, or affects one side of the face or body. Do not drive yourself.
- **Call 911 or go to the nearest emergency department if** you have back pain along with new leg weakness, numbness across both legs, or a change in bladder or bowel control. ACS calls spinal cord compression an oncology emergency. MedlinePlus says to go to the emergency room or call 911 for new symptoms. Do not drive yourself.
- **Call your care team right away if** you faint, or feel dizzy or faint every time you stand up. NCI says autonomic nerve damage can cause a dizzy or faint feeling from low blood pressure. For emergencies, call 911 or go to the ER.
- **Call your care team right away if** numbness or weakness is spreading quickly, or you have burned or cut a numb hand or foot without feeling it.
- **Call your care team right away if** tingling, numbness, or burning pain is new, or is clearly worse than at the last cycle. NCI says getting these problems diagnosed and treated early is the best way to control them, prevent further damage, and reduce pain and other complications.
- **Call your care team right away if** you are dropping things, struggling with buttons or a pen, tripping, or losing your balance.

- **Call your care team right away if** you have had cisplatin and notice ringing in your ears or changes in your hearing.

Related pages

Helpful next pages include Side Effects of Cancer Treatment, What Is Chemotherapy? How It Works, and Exercise During Cancer Treatment.

Sources

- NCI — Nerve Problems (Peripheral Neuropathy) and Cancer Treatment (cancer.gov/about-cancer/treatment/side-effects/nerve-problems), accessed August 11, 2026
- NCI — Cancer Pain (PDQ) — Patient Version (cancer.gov/about-cancer/treatment/side-effects/pain/pain-pdq)
- MedlinePlus — Spinal tumor (medlineplus.gov/ency/article/001403.htm), accessed September 29, 2026
- ACS — Bone Metastases (cancer.org/cancer/supportive-care/advanced-cancer/bone-metastases.html), accessed September 29, 2026

Source: National Cancer Institute - Nerve Problems and Cancer Treatment (cancer.gov/about-cancer/treatment/side-effects/nerve-problems)

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