

Diabetes Complications: Nerve Disease

Your nervous system is a complex network of nerves running throughout your body transmitting messages back and forth to your brain. Nerves help you feel heat, cold, pressure, pleasure and pain. They keep every part of your body working as it should.

But when you have Type 2 diabetes, these delicate nerves can become damaged. High blood glucose and other substances can reduce blood flow throughout your body and damage the blood vessels that supply oxygen and nutrients to the nerve fibers.

Damage may cause some nerve cells to lose their ability to transmit signals as they once did. This is called neuropathy.

Just having diabetes puts you at risk for neuropathy, but your risk may increase if you: often have uncontrolled blood glucose levels, are overweight, smoke or use tobacco, have kidney disease, have had diabetes for a long time.

“Prior to being diagnosed with diabetes my feet would bother me. They would have this sensation, pins and needles, and they would keep me awake at night but I didn’t realize that that was an indication that I had diabetes.”

Neuropathy can cause pain, loss of sensation, and muscle weakness, usually in the hands, legs and feet. Neuropathy can also affect how well the heart, bladder, digestive system and sexual organs work.

Neuropathy, together with reduced blood flow throughout your body, can have a serious effect on the health of your legs and feet.

For example, you may not be able to feel a cut or sore on your foot because of neuropathy. Together with reduced blood flow, the cut may have trouble healing. This can lead to infection. And high blood glucose can make it harder for your body to fight the infection.

As a result of these combined forces, small infections can become serious and lead to amputation.

But this does not have to happen. Meet with your diabetes care team on a regular basis to check your nerve response. Let them know if you experience pain in your legs, a feeling of pins and needles; or cold legs, which could mean nerve damage or poor blood flow to the legs and feet.

Often, symptoms of neuropathy are minor at first, and since most nerve damage occurs over several years, mild cases may go unnoticed for a long time. However, if it is diagnosed and treated early, neuropathy can be controlled and you may even be able to slow down its progression.

To prevent or delay neuropathy and the serious health problems it can cause, keep your blood glucose in control. Maintaining healthy blood glucose levels can protect the nerves throughout your body so take action to get your blood glucose in your target range and keep it there.

Meet with your diabetes care team to go over your blood glucose results on a regular basis and make changes to your management plan if needed.

And take special care of your legs and feet.

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Wear shoes and socks that cushion and fit well. Shop for new shoes at the end of the day when your feet are more swollen so they fit better.

Keep your feet clean and dry. Lotion can prevent your feet from getting too dry and cracking, but never put it between your toes.

Check your feet every day and report anything unusual to your healthcare provider like: if your toenails are becoming gray or blue instead of clear and pink, if you notice hair loss on your feet and legs, or if you have any cuts, blisters or sores – especially ones that aren't healing.

Have a thorough foot exam once a year by your healthcare provider or podiatrist.

"It's nothing wrong with my feet, but I go because I am a diabetic."

When you have Type 2 Diabetes you are at a higher risk for developing Neuropathy and that can lead to many serious health problems, including amputation. Work with your diabetes care team to take action to get your blood glucose levels in control so you can prevent or delay nerve disease and continue to feel everything life has to give you.